Making Headlines

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Characters:	Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter, Beverly Katz, Jimmy Price, Freddie Lounds, Margot Verger, Alana Bloom, Bedelia Du Maurier, Jack Crawford, Dr. Frederick Chilton, Peter Bernardone, Abel Gideon, Bella Crawford, Mason Verger, Miriam Lass, Kade Prurnell, Mrs. Komeda
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by maydei

Summary

Will Graham is hunting a monster.

When fate and circumstance bring him into the path of Doctor Hannibal Lecter, Will descends beneath the surface of high society in search of the murderer he seeks. But the deeper their relationship gets, the muddier the waters grow—the desire for understanding is a desperate hunger that lives inside them both.

For hidden inside Will is the shadow of… something. It sees Hannibal's secrets, hemorrhages the true intent of the Chesapeake Ripper's crimes via an anonymous website: the only one who has ever seen, ever understood. It's an insight that presents itself alongside Will's genderfluid nature, shifting from one day to the next.

With his whole world on one side and a brand new life on the other, Will balances on a thread as thin and translucent as fishing line, a dazzling lure. A mutual potential lives between them that might prove too irresistible for Hannibal to ignore—

—and one sharp slice may be enough to cut bait.

Notes

AKA the journalist AU that jumped me one day at work while listening to Lana Del Rey that desperately made my nonbinary ass crave genderfluid!will representation mixed with shameless self-indulgence. **EDIT:** now with updated summary to reflect the fact that this fic is a whole-ass thing.

~~These will be short chapters (meant to be ficlets) in a chronological collection unless stated otherwise.~~ It's a fic now, forget I said anything. Rating will go up.

Unbeta'd. Cross-posted on tumblr @maydei.

- Inspired by [Restricted Work] by Weconqueratdawn

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Chapter Notes

cw: one-time mention of nonsexual physical assault and transphobia.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

One gunshot wound, successfully stitched closed, and the patient stabilized. It's his third surgery of the night; the first involved putting pins in a compound-fractured tibia, the second was reattaching the partially-severed finger of a drunk man attempting to operate a table saw. Hannibal has only barely exited the operating ampitheatre when he is accosted by a nurse.

"Oh, Doctor Lecter. I'm really sorry to bother you, um…" Bernadette, one of the newer hires, shuffles in place. She has not yet gotten to the point where she uses her no-nonsense tone on him—Hannibal

almost finds it funny. Nurses are without a doubt the backbone of the emergency room. He simply goes where they bid him, and now is not the time for her hesitation.

"I understand, of course. Duty calls. Is there another one?" His shift is nearing an end; Hannibal has the good sense to admit he is growing weary. When he's tired, he's ineffectual. An ineffectual surgeon can be a death sentence. He is weighing the options of taking on another patient, depending on severity, when she interrupts his thoughts.

"Kind of—Dr. Guthrie is with a patient, and Dr. Cruz just stepped out. We have two patients in their early 20s who were just escorted by police. Suspected concussion and badly bruised rib cage; the other one is in pretty good shape, aside from a split lip and a probably-fractured hand, but they won't let anyone get near them."

"Assault?" Hannibal asks, and removes his soiled gloves. He quickly, thoroughly washes with the pungent antibacterial soap up to his elbows. "Assuming it's not an emergency, then."

"No," she says, and uncertainty threads through her voice.

"What is it, Bernadette?"

"One of the patients is gender non-conforming," she says. "And the police seem to be pretty laser-focused on them."

Hannibal is silent while he considers this. Transgender and nonbinary people face a much higher risk of assault. It is an unfortunate side to his job that he sees them fairly often. But he has developed something of a reputation for his understanding in dealing with them—in that regard, he's not surprised Bernadette has brought this to him in absence of searching out Dr. Cruz, who is… decidedly less accepting. He shakes the water from his hands and reaches for paper towels to blot himself dry.

"Understood," he replies. "Do you have their chart? I can provide an assessment of the situation."

Bernadette practically deflates with relief. "Thank you, Doctor. Here. I'll show you to them."

Hannibal flips the chart open, scanning as he follows his nurse, dodging the hustle and bustle of the busy Saturday-night Emergency Room as a practiced participant. The data in the chart is minimal: William S. Graham, twenty years old, student at the University of Maryland. Nothing in the medical history to cause alarm. Insurance provided through his—*their*—school.

And then Bernadette leads him behind the curtain, and Hannibal absorbs everything at once.

The officers stand on either side of the bed; there is no safe haven for William to draw away, and thus, they have drawn in on themselves. Their hair is frazzled, piled atop their head in a haphazard knot; damp with nervous sweat at the hairline, wisps of curled bangs hastily swiped away from carefully-outlined blue eyes by bloody knuckles. Their teeth are bared, a row of straight, sharp teeth painted red by a split lip, dripping blood over the artificial sheen of lipgloss.

Hannibal's keen eyes immediately make note of the darker patches on the knees of their black denim pants that disappear into black boots; contusions on the knees. Their flannel shirt is green and black plaid, smudged with blood and dirt and what appears to be brick dust. It hangs unevenly open, clutched closed by Will's other hand; a cracked pair of glasses is folded over the gaping collar. Through the gap that reveals smooth, pale skin, Hannibal sees a flash of a black satin undershirt.

“Look, you’re facing arrest for assault and forgery of documents. You shouldn’t have been out at that bar. Just tell us where you got your fake ID, and maybe we can let some of this slide—”

“Are you *kidding* me?” they snap. Their eyes flash to Bernadette and Hannibal, then back to the cops. “I’ve told you anything relevant. If you can’t do your jobs with what I’ve given you, then you don’t deserve your badges. There had to be thirty witnesses back at the bar.”

“The witnesses don’t change the fact that you were breaking the law,” one of the officers says, and Hannibal feels his blood run cold like ice, slicing through his veins. “Lying about your age, presenting yourself under false pretenses—”

It is a strange sensation, sympathy. One that Hannibal is in no hurry to embrace, and no rush to repeat. But he has always found the treatment of LGBT individuals by law enforcement to be tasteless.

And this is *his* domain, at least for the moment.

“Officers, I will have to ask you to step outside the curtain,” Hannibal says smoothly. “My name is Doctor Hannibal Lecter, I’m here to tend to the patient.”

“He’s suspected of a crime,” one officer says, short and mean-eyed, and for a moment, Hannibal considers what the flesh of his belly might taste like, rounded as it is beneath his uniform blues. It’s been months since his last display, and of course, this is too close to home—but still, he considers the benefits. “We’re not going anywhere.”

“Short of attempted murder, I will have to insist,” Hannibal replies. His gaze slides to William, and finds himself being sized up, measured by the fury behind sharp blue eyes. There is a predator living inside that skull—or, at the very least, anger enough to fuel one. “HIPAA privacy laws are very clear. I will supervise here; Bernadette, if you would care to escort the officers to question the other patient? This interview seems quite one-sided, considering most of what I see at first glance is an extensive collection of defensive wounds.”

The officers bristle; Bernadette radiates satisfaction. Police escorts are not uncommon in the emergency room, of course, but neither are victims being pressured before being properly tended to… or without legal counsel. Hannibal intends to remedy at least one of those issues.

“Officers, follow me, please,” Bernadette says. “I can lead you to Mr. McCallum, and then to our front desk to fill out chain of custody paperwork.”

They go. Some tension seeps from William Graham’s shoulders, but none of the anger from their face.

“My nurse informed me you wouldn’t let anyone tend to you,” Hannibal says, and makes no move to approach quite yet. “Would you allow me to disinfect your cuts?”

Slowly, *slowly,* they nod.

Hannibal gathers supplies from the cabinet; sterile wipes, non-stick gauze, and a collection of bandages and paper tape. He rolls the nearby stool to the edge of the bed and sets everything there for William to see, pulls on a pair of nitrile gloves before holding out one hand in silent query.

One shaking, bloody hand is set gently into Hannibal’s palm, and he gets to work.

“What are your preferred pronouns?” Hannibal asks, careful to keep his voice even. He tears open a sterile wipe and swipes in short strokes over the abrasions on bruised knuckles.

“I don’t care,” they reply quietly. “He and him is fine, I guess. I’m not trying to *lie* to anyone.”

Hannibal nods once. “You have no need to explain yourself. Gender identity is a deeply personal thing. Do you prefer to go by William, or do you have something else you’d like me to call you?”

He swallows. With the rage melting from his body, all that is left is exhaustion and simmering anger, a thin blanket to mask his fear. “Just Will.”

“Hello, Will.” He glances up and offers a small smile. He rarely has cause to use it in the operating room; it feels rusty with disuse, but knows it appears sincere. “I’ll warn you, I am usually a trauma surgeon. I was alerted to the situation by your nurse. I may be called away if another emergency arises, but in the absence of one, I am qualified to tend to your wounds.”

Will says nothing. He takes a deep breath and lets it out; it shudders, and he shivers, drawing his other arm tight around his body. “I was just defending myself. Now they’re coming after me about my fake ID.” He laughs once, bitterly. “Cops don’t care about fake IDs. Not *really.* They only care because of how I look.”

“And how do you look?” Hannibal asks, curious as to what Will might say.

Will glances up. He meets Hannibal’s eyes and holds them. “Different.”

Hannibal discards one blood-soaked wipe and reaches for the gauze. He wraps Will’s first hand, and tapes the bandage into place. He considers this. “Are we not all different?”

Will scoffs. “Only a special kind of *different* gets guys to try to beat you up outside a bar.”

Hannibal *tsks* and holds out his hand for Will’s other. “Forgive me, I didn’t mean to belittle your experience. Gender and sexuality-nonconforming individuals are at a much higher risk of violence. I see it often enough within these walls to not be ignorant of the cause.” He sets to work on Will’s other hand; the skin on his fingers is callused with years of hard work, but his fingernails are painted with sheer varnish and carefully shaped. His knuckles, though, are swollen purple and blue—very likely broken. “You will need an x-ray of your hand. It appears you may have fractured your first and second metacarpals.”

Hannibal gently flexes Will’s wrist; when he detects no flicker of a wince or any indication of pain, he hums with consideration. “No inflammation elsewhere; you know how to throw a punch.”

At that, Will grins. It makes his lip stretch, crack, and bleed again. The scent of artificial cherry is the only indication that the flushed color of his mouth is not solely from spilled blood. “Yeah. Learned that one early on.”

Hannibal answers with a small, satisfied huff. He holds off on wrapping Will’s broken hand and stands to reach for a hospital gown. He sets it on Will’s lap. “There’s blood on your pants; it seems you may have cut your knees. Do you think you can get undressed without hurting your hand and without assistance?”

Will grimaces; the wolf’s smile is gone. “I’m sure I can manage.”

“That’s not what I asked,” Hannibal replies patiently. “I’d be happy to get a nurse to help you—”

Will shakes his head. “Don’t. If you could just…” Will looks frustrated with his own inability, so terribly, vulnerably young. “If you could help me unzip my boots, I can do the rest on my own. I’m not going to hurt myself getting out of my clothes.”

“People manage to hurt themselves doing much less.” Hannibal’s voice is droll and perhaps exasperated, but the most miraculous thing happens:

Will *laughs*. “Seeing the most graceless of humanity day-in and day-out must get exhausting,” he says with a smile.

Hannibal is stunned. The monster inside him is vindicated, though he does his best to hide it. How strange, the worldly secrets that spill so carelessly out of the mouths of babes. “And the accident-prone.”

“And the violence-prone,” Will adds. He reaches for his boots and winces when he puts weight on his injured hand; shuffles to readjust and recalculate.

Hannibal interrupts before he gets that far. “Allow me.” He keeps himself steady and clinical as he lifts one black leather boot and unzips it from calf to ankle. There is a strange, sensual weight to Will’s eyes on him that borders on unprofessional. He probably should have gotten a nurse to assist Will after all, but alas—“The other, please.”

There is a considering tilt to Will’s smooth jaw, a cautious grace as he uses his toe to push the first boot off, then offer the next. Hannibal narrowly resists wetting his lips at the flash of sheer black stockings underneath.

What a fascinating conundrum.

“I’ll give you a moment,” Hannibal says. “I’m just going to check and make sure there haven’t been any intakes since you’ve arrived. I’ll be right outside.”

“Not worried I’m gonna run?” Will asks. He slips his other foot free and peels the stockings off, turning them right-side out with his careful hands and folding them together in one neat, fluid movement that is unhampered by injury. He leans back against the incline of the hospital bed, and with a flash of challenge and consideration, moves slowly to reach for the button of his pants.

Hannibal waits until his fingers reach the narrow waistband before he averts his eyes and stands. He does not consider it a failure; he knows he shows no disgust on his face, no inappropriate intrigue. The only intrigue he feels is well-concealed, and not so crudely manipulated.

“Without your shoes?” Hannibal replies with a faint tilt of a smile as he heads to the curtain, soiled wipes gathered into his palm to be discarded. “Where would you go? Slip away into the night and back to your dorm? Tend to your wounds yourself?”

“I might do better than you’d expect.” He hears the creak of the hospital bed as Will stands, the rustle of fabric as he begins to undress. It’s crass. Cheeky. Against his better judgement, Hannibal finds it amusing rather than offensive. Will’s attitude is intelligent; not purely reactionary. “I’m resourceful.”

Hannibal resists the urge to look back and behold the sight of Will Graham laid bare. No, not so soon. His shift is near done, but his night has only just become interesting. If nothing else, Hannibal is a patient man.

Something tells him that Will Graham is worth savoring piece by piece.

“I believe you,” Hannibal says, and to his own surprise, he does.

Chapter End Notes

also on tumblr

1:2

Chapter Notes

Tumblr was being an asshole, so I finally decided to put these on AO3. Unbeta'd.

cw: mention of nonsexual assault, minor wound aftercare

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hannibal discards his gloves and the bloodstained remnants of Will's care in a biohazard bin. Then he heads to the front desk to locate another of the floor nurses.

"Will Graham in lobby three will need an x-ray for his left hand," he says. "Unless there are any emergencies, please bump him up the queue. He has at least one fractured knuckle, and I'd like to get him casted before I'm off-shift. Please page me if I'm needed for an emergency, otherwise I will need to finish tending to his wounds."

Hannibal does not wait for their surprise or for anything more than a confirmation before he slips through the office and into the staff room just down the hall. He dials into his assigned locker to extract his wallet, and slips a business card into the plastic pocket that holds his hospital ID. He retreats to Will's sectioned-off area of the ER, decided.

If the police insist on giving Will a hard time for the altogether unextraordinary crime of possessing a fake identification, then Hannibal will give him a leg-up in the form of a legal reference. Though he specializes in medical malpractice suits, James Deioss is an accomplished lawyer who, to Hannibal's knowledge, has more than one victorious discrimination lawsuit under his belt.

Granting favors is not something Hannibal is in the habit of doing, but Hannibal is curious—and under the pressure of Hannibal's curiosity, strange things are bound to happen.

Will Graham is a curiosity.

"Will?" He asks when he returns to the boundary of the curtain.

"Come in," Will replies, and Hannibal does.

He pauses as the curtain falls shut behind him.

Will's clothes are in a smartly-folded pile on the foot of the bed—stockings, pants, satin camisole, flannel shirt, cracked glasses set atop it all. His heeled boots are neatly tucked underneath the hospital cot.

His back is to the door, legs crossed beneath him, and the hospital gown slouches off one shoulder. The disheveled bun in his hair has been removed, and a cascade of mussed brunette curls has been swept down around the side of his throat.

The pale canvas of Will's back has been painted with bruises; shallow, parallel scrapes have drawn pinpricks of blood that the removal of Will's shirt has torn free. They are, Hannibal notes, exactly the

right distance to denote a hard impact with a brick wall.

And lower, clinging to Will's narrow hips, is a swath of black lace in the form of sheer briefs.

He is the perfect marriage of lust and violence. Hannibal inhales silently and commits the scent of blood, sweat and cloyingly-sweet cherry lip gloss to his memory. All of it paints a portrait in his mind that he will commit to graphite later—the shape of a patient who occupies one night of his life in October, the signature scrawled *H. Lecter,* and the model's name, *Will Graham.*

"Your back is quite a sight," Hannibal says, and swallows down his appreciation for the image of red and purple and blue watercolor, the body's natural palette of pain. "Does your head hurt?"

"Only a little," Will murmurs. He looks back over his shoulder, and there is a clever, exacting light in his gaze. Normally, that sort of thing would be incensing. Incredibly rude and presumptuous, even from one so young, so naive. But Will's face holds and uncertainty, a deep melancholy that shifts beneath his skin in the form of an injured wolf, abandoned and alone. It howls with no hope for an audience, but even over the din of the Johns Hopkins PA system and the commotion of the emergency room, Hannibal can hear it echo.

Hannibal slips on a new pair of gloves. "Will you permit me to check your skull for damage?"

Will snorts. "If you can find damage to my brain, Doctor Lecter, I'm sure my classmates would be thrilled. By all means."

Hannibal huffs a breath. With careful fingers, he touches the back of Will's vulnerable neck and privately revels at his shiver. He wonders what it would be like to touch without the barrier of nitrile gloves between them; he feels the shape of Will's scalp, skims lightly with his fingertips for any rough or tender patches.

Only one place draws a closed-mouthed moan of pain—toward the crown of his head, there is a lump and the faintest crackling sensation of scabs where Will's head must have impacted. Hannibal withdraws, and his jaws click shut, teeth snap together behind his lips; to think the police were willing to paint Will as the assailant and the one in the wrong, when all indications point to the assault he had suffered.

"Would you like to tell me what happened?" Hannibal asks. "Between your back and your head, you seem to have faced some amount of violence. I'm sure that's not what you expected of your evening."

"I wasn't at the bar for a good time, if that's what you're implying," Will murmurs.

"That's not at all what I'm implying." Hannibal's fingers slip from his hair and he retreats to the supply cabinet to fish out another antiseptic wipe. "Only that speaking of what happened to you may be of some help. The attack must have come as a shock."

Will's voice tightens. "I don't need therapy, either."

"I am simply trying to assist you, Will." Hannibal isn't quite sure why he bothers, and a flash of annoyance means he is well on his way to stop trying, intriguing boy or not. "If you tell me what happened, it may not only be of help to you emotionally, but I will be able to corroborate your story based on the pattern of your wounds. If you have a cell phone, I would be happy to take photographs for you to submit as evidence to the police. This is not my first incident, Will. Those marginalized by society based upon preference must stick together if we are to survive. We are vastly outnumbered by those who would gladly see us fade away."

Will looks back. His eyes are huge and wide, oceanic blue, framed by black ink and painted-black lashes, pink powder blush and bright red scrapes. He is as lovely and vulnerable as a spring fawn. Will says nothing at first, but searches Hannibal's face with something he might categorize as desperation. No victim ever wishes to be alone in the aftermath. Hannibal wonders if Will Graham has anyone he will call once he's released.

But the implication sinks in. Hannibal can see the moment it clicks that he is safe, that he is a friend, and Will melts back into the nitrile-coated safety of Hannibal's palms. Will reaches back blindly with his less-injured hand to extract a badly-scratched smartphone from between the tower of his clothes. He unlocks it and hands it to Hannibal.

"Document it," Will says softly. "Please. You're my only real evidence."

Hannibal obligingly steps back and does as he is bid. He takes photographs of the bruise pattern, the scrapes. He gently parts Will's untamed curls and snaps a picture of the rust-red scabs on his scalp. Then he steps around, sits on the edge of the bed facing Will; takes Will's hand in his own and captures and image of his knuckles, and a close-up of his split lip.

To the violent aesthete that lives in Hannibal's heart, he is photographing the finest sensuality, and Will Graham is a new and unexpected muse. He steels himself back to impassivity as he hands the phone to Will and sees the photos locked and archived, out of his grasp.

Will swallows hard. "Thank you."

Hannibal extracts the wipe from the sterile pack and sets to work. After scant seconds of indecision, Will begins to speak.

"I was at the bar to meet a source," Will says. "Some guy kept trying to hit on me. He wouldn't take a hint. I thought I got away from him when I started my interview, but he was waiting for me to leave. When he got outside, he must've realized—the street lamps were bright, I don't know. But he shoved me into the wall and he punched me, and I just… *reacted.* I put him down. I don't know if or *when* it stopped being self-defense, but then the cops were there and I was being dragged away."

"Do you often find yourself lost to violence?" Hannibal asks. The thought is fascinating.

Will shakes his head. "Not like this. I just… I did what I did in self-defense. I should stand by that, right?" His chin drops to his chest, and the fall of his hair shifts with it. The tender nape of his neck is exposed to Hannibal's ravenous eyes. His teeth ache. "I'm going to get expelled."

"You are the victim of an assault," Hannibal replies firmly, for Will's benefit rather than his own. He does indulge in letting one hand settle over the back of Will's neck, to steady him as he deftly cleans Will's wounds. "If you were to be expelled, it would be an injustice."

Hannibal sighs as though a thought is occuring to him only for the first time. He extracts his lawyer's card from his identification pocket, and rounds the bed to sit across from Will. He presses it into Will's palm. "I fetched this for you earlier. This lawyer is a friend of mine. If the police give you a difficult time in their questioning, I advise you to call him. Tell him I told you to. He will take care of you, pro bono of course."

Will's lips part, exposing the pink slip of his tongue. He wets his lips; blood and sweet color are swept away. "I can't. I couldn't."

“I insist,” Hannibal replies. “Though I cannot force you to do anything you don’t wish, Will. It’s common sense. Your future should not be impacted by the bias of a few.”

Will’s eyes lift to his, bright with life and swarmed with guilt. “I’m the one at fault.”

“You are a victim of an assault,” Hannibal repeats. “Will. I can’t tell you what to do, but I can tell you that you do not deserve to be found at fault for this.” Hannibal pats his hand and draws back. He has crossed lines already, and does not wish to cross any more—not so soon, anyway.

But as he retreats, Will’s clever gaze follows him. “Why would you do this for me? I’m a stranger.”

Hannibal sets to work covering Will’s scrapes with gauze. He pretends not to notice Will’s head tipping back to brush against his hands, a wild and lonely thing looking for a kind touch. “Kindness and courtesy costs me nothing, but my apathy may cost you your future.” Hannibal secures the tape on one cut and moves to the next. “You said you were meeting a source. May I assume you’re a journalist?”

“Trying to be.” Will takes a breath and leans forward, ducks his head to his chest and rounds his back like a cat, the vibrant plane of it a feast to Hannibal’s roving eyes. He wonders if Will is manipulating him even now, or if he is simply as exhausted and vulnerable as he seems. “I’m a student at the Merrill College of Journalism. I’m trying to assemble my senior project, but I’ve… well, I’ve chosen an ambitious subject.”

Will’s voice is wry. Hannibal senses a story. “Ambitious projects and journalism go hand-in-hand, do they not?”

“Maybe if it was political,” Will concedes. His voice is muffled. “But this is mostly petty.”

Color him intrigued—Will has not struck him as the type to be unduly spiteful. Hannibal works his way from wound to wound. “Oh?”

“It’s about that serial killer,” Will says. “The one who the cops are stumped by—I’m sure you’ve seen the news. The one that no one can decide if it’s one killer or a few killers. Nine victims in short bursts over the last eighteen months.”

Hannibal’s hands go still. “And such a topic is petty?”

Will makes a soft sound of embarrassment; Hannibal can admit that he is *much* too distracted to pay it mind. “Only because I picked it to prove my classmate wrong.”

Hannibal is almost offended. He keeps himself in check. “You don’t find it interesting?”

“Oh!” Now *Will* sounds offended. “Of course I find him interesting. He’s a genius. It’s only petty because Freddie is *wrong.”* There’s a sneer in his voice.

Hannibal is… he’s not sure what he feels.

But Will is still going. “Freddie’s idea of journalistic ethics is to use anyone she can to spin any sensationalist story. She doesn’t think about impact. She doesn’t care about *truth.* It’s like if, if—” Will makes a frustrated sound. “If a doctor used their position to victimize those at risk. It’s like violating *do no harm.* It’s abhorrent, and she’s going to get people killed because she doesn’t *think* about what she *writes.* She doesn’t *understand* the fuel to a fire that journalism can be to a murder case. That naming something gives it power, but if you name it wrong?”

Will's bitter laugh is the finest wine on his tongue, a symphony to soothe the restless corners of his mind. Hannibal's heart makes one strong, fascinated *thump* before he gets himself under control once more.

"If she names him wrong, he won't stand for it, you know," Will murmurs. "Not this one."

Hannibal inhales. Exhales. His hands flatten on Will's back as he smoothes one last piece of tape into place. "You speak as though you know him. It's a bold assumption."

Will *hmphs,* casts a hard look back over his shoulder. All Hannibal can see of him is one sharply-lined eye, one highlighted cheek washed nearly white in the cold hospital light. "If you spent your time and risked your freedom making art, then got categorized as something so *amateur* as *The Baltimore Butcher,* wouldn't you be pissed? I would."

Even the *suggestion* of such a name is sour. Distasteful.

But it is unimaginable that Will Graham might infer that from—from *what?*

"Art," Hannibal says. He removes his hands, puts distance between them. Discards the cloth in one of the smaller biohazard containers mounted upon the wall. "You find the killings artful? Most would consider them gruesome."

The mattress creaks; Will sits up. He stretches, and when he lifts his head, the sheet of his curls tumbles down his back in an untamed wave, brushing the edges of his scapulas. He hums a short tune in a voice smooth and clear. A bar from a song, perhaps. His lips turn up at the edges in a wistful, complicated smile that he directs up at the ceiling.

"Glory and gore, though, right? Making headlines. He considers them art—or better than they were before, anyway. They're better to him dead. That doesn't sound like just a Butcher to me." Will's smile falters; irritation creeps in around the edges, and soon enough, he's scowling. "And he doesn't *only* operate within Baltimore, which Freddie seems *very* ready to discount for the sake of clever alliteration."

Hannibal tips his head in consideration. He holds out one last sealed sterile wipe; Will looks at it, then at him. "For your lip," Hannibal says. "You're still bleeding."

"Oh." Will tears it open without hesitation, and doesn't seem to think anything of it as he wipes away his lip gloss. Not fussy, then. "Yeah, thanks."

"You have quite a number of thoughts about this killer," Hannibal says and quirks a brow, distracting himself from the sight of blood and lip color mingled together, brutal and effeminate. He's not sure what effect he intends his words to have, but Will flushing red to the tips of his ears is not what he expects.

"Yeah, well…" Will hesitates, staring down at the wipe. Then, without a second thought, he folds it in half and begins to scrub at all his makeup. Black liner smudges and bleeds under the force of the alcohol; mascara smears in the hollows underneath Will's eyes, lilac with sleep-deprived shadows and starving veins. Concealer, blush, powder, everything fades. The prettily-painted facade of Will Graham becomes the face of an exhausted young adult. Bruising at his jaw had been concealed by his foundation, and is now visible to Hannibal's fascinated gaze. There is the faintest haze of ingrowing stubble, though not much to speak of.

Clad in a hospital gown and lace underwear, Will Graham is naked and defiant before him. He pulls his hair into a loose knot at the nape of his neck. With a mournful sigh, Will reaches for his glasses and wipes the cracked lenses with the edge of his hospital gown and puts them on.

Then he looks up at Hannibal, and there is a certain expression he wears—the exhausted expectation of rejection. And Will smiles, but it is not happy. “No one’s just *one* thing,” he says. “There’s no singular truth. But that doesn’t make the truth less fulfilling, does it? So I want to see *his* truth.” Will nods to himself. He looks down at his hands, his painted nails, his bruised and bloody broken knuckles. “And maybe I’ll keep Freddie from getting killed and prove her wrong all at once. But I’m not doing it for her.”

“An unconventional but noble pursuit.” Hannibal frowns. Suddenly he finds himself faced with a strange creature that he is not quite sure what to do with. A young predator with terrible potential, snared in chains of conventionality; a young knight on a noble quest for his Holy Grail. “So who would you do it for? Your quest to behold this killer and his truth.”

“Journalism gives a voice to the voiceless,” Will replies. There’s still mascara smudged beneath his lashes, blood painting his mouth where the color was wiped away; the cracks in his lenses are prison bars caging the duality of the creature within. “It seems to me this killer’s voice is the one that’s going unheard.”

Hannibal considers this. It’s an interesting thought, and he wonders what new dimensions might be reached if the tableaus left behind had an adequate eye to interpret them. “And with your insight, if you could and if you would, what name would you give to him?”

“Other than *The Baltimore Butcher?”*

Hannibal nods once. His curiosity is burning—to see what title someone like Will Graham might unknowingly bestow him.

Will stares in return. He has not been caught without an answer—it lurks somewhere inside his eyes, behind his teeth. He is gauging whether or not he wishes to share it; Anubis weighing the heart of the worthy.

“His comfort zone is large,” Will finally says. “Maryland, Virginia, Delaware, D.C. He crosses state lines with ease and avoids detection. He doesn’t seem to have any visible victim preferences, so either he’s random or he’s smart. He’s communicating through these murders, whether or not anyone is listening.” Something flickers across Will’s face, and is gone before it can be categorized. “But I’m listening.”

Yes, Hannibal realizes. Yes he is.

Will’s eyes waver and drop. With a sigh, he takes off his glasses again and casts them to the end of the bed, a lost cause. “It’s not my right to name him, Doctor Lecter. I’m just a student, I’m not a professional. I’m not law enforcement or a psychologist. Every guest lecturer says to *never* name a criminal. That it can embolden them, spur them to action and greater heights, seeking greater attention. But I’ve named him in my head, because in my head I know him. He speaks, and I hear his words. When he kills, I become an extension of his will.”

His Will. Hannibal rather likes the sound of that.

“To me,” Will says softly, “he’s *The Chesapeake Ripper.”*

The Baltimore Butcher. The Chesapeake Ripper. Of the two, Hannibal immediately knows which he prefers. There is a subtle cleverness, a reverence that is beholden with being named after Jack the Ripper. It is a history as rich as the Chesapeake Bay is vast.

And most importantly?

Jack the Ripper was never caught.

Hannibal bites hard on the inside of his cheek until he tastes blood. He narrowly avoids smiling. "Well," he replies instead, "It's been months since any such killings. Perhaps he's finished his work."

"He's not done," Will says with certainty. "He's not."

Hannibal hums. No, of course he's not done. He'll never be done. Even if Will's Ripper fades or relocates, Hannibal will never be done. Blood and bone are his birthright. Conquering is his nature.

Perhaps Will's professors were right.

To be named is a powerful thing.

"It's certainly more tasteful," Hannibal says with a nod. "Your name for this killer. It's a fitting title."

Will blinks slowly, doelike. The removal of his makeup has not diminished the length of his lashes; the smudge of black around his lids accentuates the crisp color of his eyes. He looks up at Hannibal, soft and open and vulnerable, a heart ready to be crushed. To be consumed.

How would Will Graham taste?

"I wish you every good fortune with your project," Hannibal says with a small smile. "Aside from the misfortunes of this night, of course."

Will, though clever, is so terribly young, so sweetly naive when he lowers his eyes and murmurs, "It hasn't been so bad."

There is a knock.

"Yes?" Hannibal replies.

Bernadette pokes her head around the curtain. "I'm ready to take Will for an x-ray if you're done with him, Doctor Lecter."

"Thank you, Bernadette, that will do nicely," Hannibal replies. "And your guests?"

"Mr. McCallum cracked like an egg," she replies with a smug smile. "The officers might have more questions, but I think everything is going to be fine." She turns her gaze to Will and goes soft with sympathy at his ruined makeup. "Oh, honey. I hope you weren't crying."

Hannibal surveys Will, his demure persona. Now that the fight has worn away, he's malleable. "No, nothing of the sort. Will is very strong."

Will is indeed quite strong. And unbelievably soft.

"Thank you for your help, Doctor Lecter," Will says. The flicker of a familiar business card between his fingers is quick as a minnow, and disappears to be folded into Will's clothes again. "And your

understanding."

"It's been my pleasure, Will." Hannibal reaches out, and Will reaches back. Will's handshake is warm and firm. Respectable. He looks into Hannibal's eyes and does not look away until they part. "I'll check in with you when you return, schedule allowing—"

The beeper on Hannibal's hip goes wild at the same time he hears, *"Paging Doctor Lecter, Ambulance Bay One. Doctor Lecter, Bay One."*

Hannibal sighs, looking skyward as though the PA speaker embedded in the ceiling held any answers, or perhaps mercy. "Well, perhaps not."

"I can manage from here," Will replies. His head tips to the side in consideration. "Good luck."

Hannibal nods in thanks. He pats Bernadette on the shoulder as he passes. "Thank you for your help. Good evening to you both."

It's a strange thing, perspective—how the appearance of one person in a life can completely eclipse another. Will Graham lingers on Hannibal's mind, stalks the shape of his shadow to the operating room, and home thereafter. When it comes time to write his notes on the surgeries he has performed this night, he finds himself struggling to remember names. More concerning yet is that his usual page-per-patient policy has been consumed. Will Graham, who should have been a footnote at the bottom of his daily log, grew a life of his own beneath the strokes of Hannibal's pen and took up two pages from beginning to end. From his bared teeth and wild eyes to the secrets he revealed for want of a sympathetic audience.

The Chesapeake Ripper.

Yes, Hannibal decides, and sets down his pen. He closes his journal and picks up his sketchbook with a memory of watercolor bruises in his mind. Yes, he likes the sound of that.

Chapter End Notes

[also on tumblr]

1:3

Chapter Notes

I plan to update this fic as often as I have a new part available! I hope that to be every day or two, life and social interactions allowing. I'm hoping the less-formal nature of the way I'm writing it will lend itself to greater speed. Here's hoping.

Unbeta'd.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Weeks pass. Though Will Graham never entirely fades from Hannibal's mind, he does slip to the back of it. Work is all-encompassing, as it always is—and what few gaps exist in Hannibal's schedule are filled by his studies.

Surgery is… exhausting. It consumes him, of course, but it requires more energy and time than Hannibal is strictly willing to give as he approaches his forties. As a surgeon, he lives a solitary life. He moves between shifts like a wraith, kept company only by his nurses and any poor soul who finds themselves eating vending machine food in the break room. Hannibal rarely has time for his finer pursuits of art and music. He barely has time to cook for himself.

So he studies. Psychology, he thinks, is a suitable use of his time. Office hours to keep, his own life to maintain. It is a long road of sleepless months, if not years that lay before him of splitting his time, but the result will be well worth it.

But in the meantime…

A name lingers in Hannibal's mind, gifted to him. It carries infinitely more power than if he were to bequeath it to himself. But a realization hovers just beside it, a roiling stormcloud that demands the audience of raindrop eyes—

If Hannibal does not make a display of his kills again, and *soon,* no one will have any cause to know Will's name for him.

So he thinks. He plans. And with the bitter memory of discrimination floating across the surface of his mind, Hannibal thinks of Andrew Caldwell; he pulls a business card from his rolodex and a recipe card from his cookbook.

He arranges a place for Andrew Caldwell in the archives of his own personal history. Andrew is, of course, quite beside himself to be included.

Hannibal considers who he might next commit to the halls of his memory palace while preparing his favored recipe for armagnac-sauteed kidneys with roquefort and walnut butter, served over finely-sieved potatoes. The food is delicious, but the meal itself is… lacking. Hannibal ponders for some time what ingredient he might be missing, what element he might add so his next dinner hits a more satisfying note.

It is not until he paces the halls of Johns Hopkins and spies a familiar silhouette that he realizes it may not be the food, but rather the company.

Or the lack thereof.

And Hannibal does not *chase.* But he finds himself following the click of high heels (because his nurses certainly know to wear more sensible shoes) and the sickly-sweet scent of cherry lip gloss.

"You know I'm not gonna name names," that familiar voice wheedles, and Hannibal prickles at the familiarity of the tone as he closes the distance between them. He quiets his steps and listens carefully as he approaches, as the voices turn off into one of the smaller sample labs. "Please, Bev? Five minutes. I know procedure. I won't post any pictures. I just need to see it in person."

"You don't want to see it in person," a young woman replies, droll and exasperated, but no less fond. "He only just got released and he's all… melty. No one wants to see it in person. *I* don't want to see it in person, and that's my job."

"Yeah, but *I* do."

"Then you're nuts, and I'm keeping you out for your own mental health."

Hannibal leans against the wall outside the lab, content to listen—he's not needed for nearly another hour, and though he'd intended to finish up paperwork, this is much more worth his time and interest.

"You know that if you just, like, submitted a letter of request to the feebs, they might let you look, right?" There is a shuffle of sound, the slide of a cabinet, the hum of a centrifuge. Ah, so Will's cohort is an employee.

"They wouldn't do that," Will replies unhappily. "It's an ongoing investigation, and I'm a student. Hell, I had to wait until he was released *here.* "

"I'm a student, too, and I'm not losing my internship for you. This is *Johns Hopkins,* Will. I worked my whole life for this."

"I know that." Will sounds defeated. "You know Freddie's probably sleeping with Zeller right now and stealing his access card, right?"

"Then good for Zeller for getting laid, I guess, but I'm glad it's not my ass on the line." Another shuffle of movement. "What did you do to your hand, by the way?"

"Got jumped by some asshole. It doesn't matter. You should see the other guy."

"Where'd you get patched up?"

"Here, where else?"

"Who's your doc? Hope it wasn't Cruz. He's an asshole to… to—"

"To people like me? Yeah, most are." Will goes quiet with consideration. "Some trauma surgeon called off the cops. Doctor Lecter. He was really… nice."

"Doctor *Lecter?* Wow, Will. I thought that guy was too busy to smile."

WIll groans quietly. “He was. I rambled like an idiot and then he got paged. Probably freaked him out with all the murder talk.”

“Nah. Guy sees more death than half the doctors here. He’s hardcore.” Another series of noises. Hannibal is quietly amused, silently pleased. The idea of Will having *freaked him out* with his talk of a murderer is quaint, even if the murders were not of his own making. But then—“Hot, though, right?”

“Bev, *please,* ” Will says, so strained and emphatic it’s nearly a whine. “I was dying inside.”

“You’re hot too, you know,” *Bev* replies knowingly. “And it wouldn’t kill the guy to have a human interaction with someone conscious now and again. You’re probably the prettiest thing he saw all night.”

Well, she’s not *precisely* wrong, but Hannibal would hardly use the word *pretty.* Exquisite, perhaps. Beautiful, at the least.

“Bev.”

“What? Just the facts.”

“Okay, you win. I’m going. Will you at least get me a copy of the autopsy report?”

“Quantico won’t release it to us until the case is closed, and god knows how long *that* will take. Even the one done here will be under lock and key. We’re lucky they even released the body since the sister hasn’t chosen a funeral home. Sorry, Will.”

Will makes a murmur of quiet discontent. “Journalism is dying a slow and brutal death.”

“Should have gone into law enforcement,” Bev says sympathetically. “Get your degree and come run the Quantico gauntlet with me in a year or two.”

“They’ll want me to cut my hair,” Will replies. “And everyone in the psych program wanted to diagnose me.”

“The empathy thing, right?”

Hannibal’s attention is drawn. Empathy thing?

“And the gender thing, and the personality thing. Chilton called me a *unique cocktail of personality disorders and neuroses* at the intake interview, then he was all pissed when I left.”

“Fuck that guy.”

“I’d definitely rather not.”

“How about Doctor Lecter?”

“Jesus Christ. I’m *leaving.* ”

Will’s retreating footsteps grow nearer, as does the brusque and agitated click of high heels, and Hannibal only has time to turn and make it appear as though he is just passing by when Will rounds the corner and slams into him. He reels back, stumbling, and Hannibal reacts quickly—he catches

Will at the waist and hauls him forward, uses his own weight as a counterbalance to keep Will on his feet, even as his messenger bag tumbles to the ground.

And Will is as lovely as he remembers.

Brown eyeliner, glossy red lip color, peach blush that steadily reddens—Will stares at him in open-mouthed wonder and despair. His glasses are perched precariously atop his head, lenses replaced; Hannibal reaches out to catch them before they tip backward. His hair is loose, careless curls smooth and pretty. His soft green button-down hangs loose over skintight denim tucked into brown leather boots. His eyes are vibrant, the green making them shine verdant, rather than oceanic blue.

And there is an olive-green men's hunting jacket tied around his hips. It's decidedly out of place, but its presence gives Will the appearance of curves. Hannibal's gaze sharpens. He wonders who it belongs to.

Bev emerges at the commotion and Hannibal has a split-second of recognition for Guthrie's young intern, Beverly Katz. She sees him in return, and when the surprise melts away, she wears a look of sly satisfaction.

"So," Beverly says, "Doctor Lecter. Come down to the blood lab often?"

Hannibal's brows raise. Will's features smooth into something appropriately flustered, but there's a glint of mortification in his eyes. "As it happens, my office is down the hall." He assures that Will is steady and stable before he releases him. Will takes two steps back and puts his glasses on, shoulders tense as he stares determinedly at the frames rather than Hannibal's eyes. He does not prostrate himself to pick up his dropped belongings. It's telling in its determination not to lose what little ground he bears. "Hello again, Will."

Will's jaw twitches. His face smooths. It seems the more strain he is under, the more variable his ability to control his reactions. Fascinating. "Hello Doctor Lecter."

Will's left hand is bound in a cast from fingers to forearm; his sleeve is tucked into the top, and he holds it close to himself. It looks to be in good shape, but Will's posture is defensive. Hannibal hums, a perfect picture of appropriately casual concern. "I do hope I haven't hurt you."

Bev takes pity on her friend. She scoops Will's bag up and slides it onto his shoulder, then inserts herself smoothly at Will's hip. She links their arms together. "We were just going for lunch."

Hannibal resists the urge to smile. "With your gloves on?"

Will's eyes close. He sighs, low and long and pained.

Bev shrugs shamelessly, unconcerned at being caught in her white lie. Well, at least she follows through. "The brain wants what it wants."

His lips twitch. "So I hear."

Will ducks his chin. The defeated gesture lasts only a second before he stands tall and composed and forces a smile of his own, all teeth. "Actually, Bev, I have some questions for Doctor Lecter about taking care of my cast. Can I catch up with you?"

There is an *intensely* interested glint in Beverley Katz's eyes. She hesitates, eyes flickering between them, but not for long. Whatever concern her instincts raise is smoothed by Hannibal's stellar

reputation. It's the benefit of a reputable career. "You better," Bev says, and stares at Will meaningfully as she passes. "I'll see you later."

Will waits until she's gone before he turns a wry glance to Hannibal. And oh, *there* he is—the shrewd and vivacious creature he'd met those weeks ago. "How much did you hear?"

Hannibal radiates satisfaction with the small slip of his smile. "I'm afraid I don't know what you mean."

Will scowls; his arms fold across his chest, and the shift exposes a thin strap beneath his daringly-buttoned collar. He's expectant, demanding. His fire lights him from the inside, shining from beneath his skin.

Hannibal wonders if the bruises on his back have faded.

Will waits, and Hannibal indulgently relents. "What would you like me to have heard? The tail end of gossip between two friends? Or perhaps your maneuver for your associate to give you confidential patient data? That's quite rude, Will. Very fortunate for her career that she decided not to share it with you."

"I knew Bev wouldn't give me anything," Will replies. He doesn't seem cowed at all. What a shameless, stubborn thing. "I was hoping she would, but I didn't expect it."

"And what is it in the morgue that has you so interested?" Hannibal asks. He suspects he already knows.

Will does not disappoint. His stance softens; he leans one shoulder against the doorway and stares wistfully down the hallway. "There's a new body," Will says, hushed and reverent. "It was released from Quantico this morning to Johns Hopkins morgue in the absence of a funeral home to take care of the remains. I wanted to see it, if I could."

Hannibal had heard as much. He's much more interested in *why* . He inclines his head. "And what would you hope to find?"

The barest points of Will's teeth show behind his lips. He inhales, drags the scent of antiseptic and sterile plastic over the roof of his mouth like an animal scenting for blood. His nose wrinkles with the faintest twinge of disgust. Yes, the odors of the hospital are artificial and pungent and take getting used to. Hannibal will not miss it when he leaves to start his own practice.

"Answers," Will says.

Hannibal breathes evenly. He considers Will. He considers his options. He has only months left at this hospital, but he would be a fool to risk his reputation. However, he will not deny that he is curious.

What answers does Will hope to find within the bloating, distended corpse of Andrew Caldwell?

More importantly, what answers does Hannibal hope to find from Will?

"We are all, in this life, seeking things that are not easily found," Hannibal says, and nods in the direction of Will's longing gaze. In a smooth, genteel gesture, he offers Will his arm. "As it happens, I have a form to pick up at the mortuary for a patient who passed last night. Perhaps you would accompany me?"

Hope. It breathes life and rapt attention into Will Graham, as well as a sudden, sharp current of suspicion. It is strangely soothing to know that Will is sceptical of his motivations. As he should be. It's a testament to his clever nature, and the expanding satisfaction behind Hannibal's ribs reminds him that he is not wasting his time.

No. He's simply… indulging.

And what is life without indulgence?

Will opens his mouth, and he hesitates. He closes it. Perhaps he's rethinking asking questions or looking this gift horse in the mouth. It's both a blessing and a curse—Hannibal is prepared to allow Will peer behind the veil, so long as he is willing to overlook the fangs within the stallion's maw.

Finally, he nods. His teeth worry his lower lip, and some of the glossy color is swept away. Will seems entirely unconscious of it as his lips press together, redistributing the gloss as Hannibal has seen his nurses do a thousand times, and has never caught his attention before now. The soft *pop* of Will's mouth parting on a sigh is temptation incarnate.

"If you're sure," Will says, and slips his callused, manicured hand into the bend of Hannibal's elbow. The other, casted in white, is a stark reminder of their meeting and hangs at Will's side.

One corner of Hannibal's mouth curls into a smirk before he bites it back, and simply absorbs the pleasant weight and warmth of having Will Graham on his arm. In truth, there are not many things he wouldn't do to see Will's face as he takes in Hannibal's work. It matters not if Will believes his artwork to be anonymous—it simply means that his reaction to it will be unfiltered. Raw.

Hannibal is so keenly interested in what Will thinks.

"Quite sure," Hannibal replies.

Will glances up through his lashes, equal parts calculating and uncertain. Hannibal sees wariness there, a ticking clock counting down behind his eyes to the moment when Will fears he'll find out what Hannibal *wants.* Perhaps he thinks he might already know.

"Thank you. You really don't have to do this."

At this angle, the frames of Will's glasses obscure his eyes. Slowly, as to give time to avoid it if he'd prefer, Hannibal reaches to adjust them.

As the frames slide up the delicate bridge of Will's nose and settle into place, Will doesn't flinch.

Blue and green and gold around the pupil—Will really does have such stunning eyes. What will he see when he looks at Andrew Caldwell? A broken man, sliced in half and divided between the aisles of a school bus?

Or will he see something more?

"Will, believe me," Hannibal says, and bares his teeth in his most charming smile. "It will be my genuine pleasure."

Chapter End Notes

reblog on tumblr

1:4

Chapter Notes

> While Tumblr continues to be a terrible hellsite that changes all my punctuation to ASCII, I'll be posting the full chapters here from now on. Tally-ho!

For obvious reasons, the morgue is kept colder than the rest of the hospital. Hannibal is used to it, thin cotton scrubs or no. Though he is able to save most patients who end up on his operating table, it is only natural that he lose some as well. As such, he stops by often enough to know what to expect.

Will shivers against his side as they cross the threshold, and the door swings closed behind them. It's not unlike stepping within the gates of Hell, Hannibal would imagine: a slow and measured descent further and further from the sun's warmth.

To their good fortune, it's lunch time—the medical examiner has stepped out and the room has been left unsupervised. Hannibal slips his arm from Will's with a quirk of his lips, and makes himself busy searching for the paperwork he needs in a nearby filing cabinet.

The click of Will's heels against the tile is nearly deafening. Hannibal glances up—Will is turning in place beside the desk. His oversized hunting jacket flares around his hips like a gown, and Will's face is writ with such consuming wonder that one might think he were in a museum or gallery of fine art. Hannibal wasn't aware that a morgue could be so fascinating. Perhaps to someone who does not normally see one, there is some sort of morbid glamor to the cold sheets of steel.

"Have you never been in a morgue before?" Hannibal asks.

Will huffs a laugh. He's out of place here, but now that he's settled, he doesn't seem to feel it. "Only once, and I wasn't exactly thinking about it at the time."

Intriguing. Hannibal lifts a clipboard from a hook on the wall and shuffles through in search of his patient's name from the night before. He allows himself to focus on Will instead. He is, after all, what Hannibal is really here for. "Good manners would tell me not to ask."

Will shoots him a shrewd glance at his non-question. After a moment, he turns his back to Hannibal and shrugs. It's a paltry defense, but Hannibal lets him have it. Any ground he gives to Will is trust being built. He would see it become a bridge, if he has his way.

"My father died," Will admits, and leans his hip against the ME's station. "Heart attack—but they found liver cancer once they opened him up. There was no winning, really. I went to UMMC Midtown to claim his remains."

Hannibal grimaces with distaste. He watches Will pace across the room, dodging around the autopsy table. He stares at the body lockers, stacked three-high in a grid across the wall. His shoulders roll back, and Will's free hand wraps around the bulk of his cast behind his back. "No wonder. That hospital is one health inspection from condemnation. Perhaps it's best you don't remember."

“Don’t *remember,”* Will says, and shrugs as he turns to face Hannibal, “don’t *want* to remember. It’s all the same. This is different.” He stops. His eyes are luminous as he meets Hannibal’s, even and assessing. “I know what I’m here for. But what are *you* here for, Doctor Lecter?”

Hannibal steps forward and stops, sits against the examiner’s desk. He rolls up the cuffs of his white medical coat around his forearms with one hand. How unexpected of Will—and foolish. “Do you really intend to interrogate me before you get your answers?”

Will frowns and watches the motion of his fingers. “ *You* have my answers. So, yes. I’d like them before I find out I’m digging myself into a hole.”

Hannibal pulls the form he needs from the clipboard, then stacks and sets them flat on the desktop beside him. “Very well. Perhaps I can ease your mind.”

Will paces with precise, cautious steps. His fingers skim the narrow ledges atop the metal cooler doors, and lifts his head to look up at the very highest row. The movement jostles his curls, which shift with the tilt of his chin. He’s on the prowl, a lion cub chasing locusts, preparing to pounce.

Hannibal settles back and tries not to smile. He wouldn’t want to insult Will, after all. Insult is the last thing Hannibal intends. Consumption, perhaps—flesh between his jaws and blood slipping down his throat, the sweet warmth of a squirming body and a chase that ends in carnality.

The real question is… one-sided or two? How deep does Will’s fascination with his killer reach? And where does his attraction to Hannibal’s physicality intersect with his need to discover the Chesapeake Ripper’s mind?

What steps will he be willing to take to get what he desires?

Will sets his back against the lockers and folds his glasses over his collar. They slip down, settling in the gap between the buttons—a tempting vee exposing a pale chest dotted with freckles. Hannibal blinks, slow and languid, and doesn’t avert the path of his eyes as they dip and return to lock with Will’s.

“What is it you want?” Will asks softly. It echoes off the steel and tile.

Hannibal tilts his head just so, and remains quite still otherwise. “Nothing in particular,” he says, and it’s not entirely a lie. “I prefer to encourage academic curiosity. You had a problem, and I had the means to provide a solution.”

Will takes a breath and lets it out. There is a crack of vulnerability in his armor; he wears femininity and precociousness with finesse, but the threat that looms at the edge of his instincts has no regard for male nor female—it’s simply predator and prey. Will senses something larger than him in the room, and he knows it has teeth.

His awareness alone is worth Hannibal’s respect.

Will slips his bag off his shoulder and lowers it slowly to the floor. The strap falls away from him, coiling like a serpent around his feet. Perhaps he is unburdening himself in preparation to run. Or perhaps it is a show of trust—dropping what juvenile weapon he might have in the form of a heavy weight. His intentions are a mystery… but in his eyes, so are Hannibal’s. “What do you want in return for my solution?”

Hannibal’s lips twitch. He lets Will see it. “Who says I want anything from you, Will?”

Will's voice goes quiet. His answering, flickering smile is pained. *"Everyone* wants something from me."

If Hannibal were a more simple man, the display might arouse a protective instinct. It's vulnerable. It's faltering. It's uncertain.

And there is a light in Will's eyes that says it is entirely dishonest.

Hannibal smiles then, truly—he finds honest appreciation in Will's deception. Wilting flower, indeed. He seeks to force action from Hannibal by painting himself in such a light. Any usual predator would pounce on Will in this moment. Any genuine soul would reassure him.

Will seeks to bluff him into folding.

"I find your interest interesting," Hannibal says. He looks aside over the medical examiner's desk, casually straightening objects with only vague focus upon them. Order begets order, after all. "I have no need to seek out life and death. For me, it's simply part of the job. But you, Will."

He looks up. Will is attentive and sharp, and Hannibal's grin widens.

"You're clever," he says. "Determined. A bright young mind in search of truth, looking in places where devils dare not tread. I admire your tenacity, and I am no great fan myself of red tape."

Will's fingernails tap against the stainless wall. His head tips to the side and pulls a tidal wave of curls with it. It's coy. Coquettish. And when Will smiles, there's amusement there that's genuine. "So, what? I'm young and pretty and you just want to thrill-seek by letting me break the rules?"

Hannibal barks out a laugh. The concept is ludicrous—and yet. "And if I told you that were exactly it?"

Red lips bare white teeth, and Will's eyes are shards of glass.

It happens all at once.

He turns on a dime, wrenches open the handle on the cooler, and the stainless slab slides out. Hannibal sits forward; he'll admit the move surprises him, especially when it is so clearly two halves of one body that distends the sheet—Andrew Caldwell.

Something tells him that it's not luck that has guided Will's hand.

Will coughs at the stench; his broken hand covers his lower face, and his eyes narrow in a fierce, watering squint. Hannibal is on his feet and crossing the room in an instant, but Will is quicker. A nitrile glove snaps out of his pocket, and Will pinches the corner of the sheet between its folded halves. He rips it back, and Caldwell's body is exposed.

Hannibal grinds to a halt.

The body is purpling, chilled in stasis, but clearly rotting. It's the corpse of an animal that is long since fresh, and in the end, all flesh bloats the same in death. The face is distorted. The figure is misshapen.

Will's eyes are ravenous.

“Sorry, Doctor,” he says. There is a creased and folded piece of paper in his hand, and he stares down at it, eyes flickering rapidly as he reads the stolen ME’s report and finds his way back to the victim. Hannibal’s victim. “I don’t find you that interesting.”

Any normal man would be insulted. Some, perhaps, to the point of violence.

Hannibal is not normal.

Neither, it seems, is Will Graham.

And he has never been more thrilled to be proven wrong.

Will glances to him, but barely for a second; whatever he sees in Hannibal, he dismisses as inconsequential. In the moments that Hannibal takes to understand the manipulation he has faced, Will absorbs the corpse before him. And just as Hannibal opens his mouth to speak, Will takes a step back. His eyes close. He tucks the paper back into his pocket, and falls entirely still.

And then Will reaches back—he ties his hair into a rough bun at the base of his neck. Without looking, he puts his glasses on, though he doesn’t yet look through the lenses. He picks at the knot of the jacket around his hips, and casually shrugs it on. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, and sticky red gloss smears across his knuckles; licks his lips and consumes the rest.

In thirty seconds, Will Graham has donned the skin of someone else.

And then he opens his eyes once more.

His voice is a growl that rumbles from the depths of his register—not the smooth and sweet intonation he has used both for Hannibal and for Beverly. And when he speaks, he hemorrhages secrets that are not for him to know. Each word is picked and precise, but flows into the next. Each syllable is percussive, and he speaks a melody of death into existence.

He does not walk around the slab. He *stalks.*

“I attack Andrew Caldwell from behind. His struggles are minimal. I’ve surprised him—for some reason, he trusted me. I am either known to him, or I gave him reason to let his guard down. I put a needle in his neck, and he is unconscious in seconds. This is what I do. It is my first step, and I am a practiced dancer.”

Will rounds the table to Caldwell’s right side. He crouches, and puts himself on eye-level with the jagged, festering wound. He *tsks* as though disappointed, and casts a stony look to the man’s disfigured face. “I tear him open. He is awake while I do it. I am a sadist, but this man’s suffering is special to me. I savor it. Each cut is not so much a cut as it is a tear. I *rip* him open. Whatever his transgression, it is particularly offensive—he’s made it personal for me. He’s *offended* me, enough that I break my silence. Enough that I return to my stage and declare this man a heretic to the holy rite of my good name.”

Will stands— *towers* over Andrew Caldwell. He looks down dispassionately, a cruel and capricious god.

He is stunning.

“I sever him at the spine. I am sure to break him last. I don’t know or care if he dies from shock or a broken spinal column. My last act is to remove his kidney, liver, and spleen.” Will hesitates. He blinks

slowly, and so softly, he murmurs, “One of these things is a lie. I don’t care about all of them. But it doesn’t matter; he hurts until he dies, and I am satisfied.”

Will looks him over, head to toe. His hand hovers over the body, just inches away—close enough to feel the chill, not not so close as to taint the evidence. It lingers in the air over the disjoin between torso and hip. “I place him in a school bus, because this man is unseemly and juvenile. He is across the aisle from his other half, just as I was beside myself at his offense. It is undignified. It is brutal. He deserves this. With this act, I will put him from my mind at long last. This is my design.”

Will’s eyes waver, assess the body of Caldwell like one might consider a swatted pest.

He lifts his head. He takes a breath. His eyes close, and Will’s shoulders roll, and the jacket slips down his arms until it catches on his elbows, a cloak donned and shed in equal turn.

Will hooks his finger over the nosepiece of his glasses and pulls them from his face, secures them at his breast. It is the removal of a helm. Beneath the lenses lies a different person—a different shape of Will Graham. In this moment, Will is the Tower of Babel, divorced from himself and banished from Hannibal; the creature that speaks with his shared tongue is gone, but not forgotten.

Hannibal has captured a glimpse of a divine creature of God.

An empathy thing, they had said. Now Hannibal sees Will’s truth: *pure* empathy. The ability for Will to place himself within the bones of another and ride the waves of a mind.

And he is *beautiful.*

Will wears the hunter’s jacket like a shawl. He ducks his head while he covers Caldwell’s body once more, careful to use the nitrile as to not contaminate that which has already been combed for evidence. With a push, Caldwell’s remains slip back into the locker. Will does not seek to take pictures.

When he turns to Hannibal—and he does—it is with the medical examiner’s report extended, and his chin held high. “Thank you, Doctor Lecter. I believe this belongs to you.”

Hannibal isn’t sure what his face shows, but he can feel the glow of his own intrigue. He reaches to accept the page, and knows he’ll conceal what Will has done here. He knows he’ll allow Will anything.

Anything but leaving him behind.

Hannibal will create a trail of bodies if he must, so long as it leads Will back into his grasp.

“Astounding,” Hannibal says honestly. Emphatically.

Will’s hand falters. The report slips from his fingers, and Hannibal captures it before it falls. Will blanches, leaving only the cool pink tint of his foundation atop his ashen skin. “Excuse me?”

“I said you are astounding,” Hannibal repeats. He knows Will heard him the first time; knows Will is floored and displaced by the words from the flutter of his lashes. The smug insolence is gone, and so is his stony countenance. “Forgive me, Will. You may not think me interesting in the least, but I find you wholly unique. An individually stunning mind in a world of mortal men.”

Will stares at Hannibal with raw disbelief. He doesn’t budge, and gives no ground now that the shock has passed. “Most tell me it’s terrifying. Unsettling at best.”

“Unsettling,” Hannibal acknowledges with a nod. He steps forward, and is pleased when Will doesn’t give an inch. Defiant to the last. “Most would find it terrifying to find their voice coming from another’s mouth. Do they fear what you will see inside them, I wonder?”

Will grits his teeth as Hannibal draws near. Though pale even now, Will radiates heat. “Do you fear what I’d see inside you?”

“I have no qualms about the contents of my character,” Hannibal replies, and reaches out. Will watches him like a hawk, but goes still and silent when Hannibal skims the frames of his glasses with one finger, mere inches from his sternum—close enough to brush the gaping collar of his shirt and allow Will to feel his warmth in return.

But Hannibal doesn’t touch him. Not really.

“I know what to expect from myself,” he adds smoothly, then tucks his hand into the pocket of his scrubs. Will’s pupils fatten with either arousal or adrenaline, perhaps both. His jaw snaps shut, and Hannibal languishes in his undivided attention. “Though I keep finding myself surprised by you.”

When Will speaks, it’s neither his soft persona or his inner predator whose voice Hannibal hears—it’s something in between. A little of both, accented by distinct pronunciation and the clicking of teeth. “So you *often* pursue those much younger than you, Doctor?”

So gratingly, delightfully rude.

Hannibal leans in, if only to see the fluttering of Will’s lashes, the subtle flash of his nerves that he dares not indulge for want of appearing strong. “Not at all,” Hannibal says into the slip of space between them. “Though if I decide to start, Will, I’m sure you’ll be the first to know.”

“Liar,” Will murmurs. His eyes are bright and fierce. He is as keenly stimulated by their banter as Hannibal is. “I see the way you look at me. You want me twice as much now that you’ve seen my parlor trick, Doctor Lecter. Have you been studying psychology very long?”

Hannibal grins. “Preparing for a second residency. I’m sure the emergency room will be quite sad to see me go.”

“It’s a shame I have no use for a psychiatrist,” Will replies. His gaze goes hard. Challenging.

Hannibal puts space between them to better look at Will: his silhouette, his bristling, threatened mind. He clearly thinks Hannibal means to use him for his empathy—nothing more than a rat running in a maze, like that buffoon of a psychiatrist, Frederick Chilton, meant to use him for.

Hannibal wishes to watch Will run, but the last thing he hopes to see is a rat.

“No,” Hannibal agrees. Lightning crackles through his veins, through his mind. It’s been years since an opponent managed to stimulate his thoughts, to offer any challenge at all. If this is Will Graham at twenty, what will he become by forty? And what greater heights might Will reach if Hannibal is the one who accompanies him there?

It’s a strange and dangerous thought.

Before him lies a hunter of monsters. What might it take to make him a hunter of men?

“You don’t need a psychiatrist,” Hannibal says softly, knowingly. “You need access. You’re smart, Will. You know what steps to take for getting what you want. What you *need* is a reason to be in the

places you go.”

Will’s eyes narrow. “What are you suggesting?”

“Perhaps something for both of us.” Hannibal takes another step back, and another. His smile grows as Will leans forward, follows his path like a hound tracking the scent of blood, not yet released by the hand of his master.

He hopes Will’s ready to do his worst.

Will lifts his chin. He blinks, measured and slow. Then he tips his head back against the morgue wall —a lovely, deadly thing—and stares at Hannibal through the black fringe of his lashes.

He certainly looks ready.

“What do you have in mind?”

1:5

Chapter Notes

I realized I made an error when I originally picked Will's university off a random list of Maryland colleges, I had decided on Merrill and then completely put a different school by accident. This is why we proofread, kids! Fic has now been edited to reflect he attends the Merrill College of Journalism at University of Maryland, which lies halfway between Wolf Trap and Baltimore (about half an hour from each).

Also, please note that Will's experience with his gender fluidity does not reflect the experience of every nonbinary person. Each of us is different and deals in different ways, has different feelings about the importance of our pronouns, and how we present ourselves on a day to day basis. Will's feelings and experience aligns closely with my own experience, and should not be taken as any sort of standard.

I personally don't worry very much about my pronouns since I primarily present one way because of my job. This is why I've decided to stick with he/him pronouns for Will throughout the fic, regardless of his shifting appearance. However, pronouns are a very personal thing, and many people care very deeply about using their chosen pronouns, which should always be honored once that person confirms what they prefer. It costs zero dollars and zero cents to make sure your friends and acquaintances are comfortable!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The space between them is not enormous, but the tension makes it feel more vast than it is. Will stands tall and proud, a demanding and expectant muse. Hannibal sits atop the desk once more. He allows Will the position of power with the high ground, while Hannibal assumes the position of comfort. He has no intention of bowing to Will, but compromise is the currency of a successful negotiation. His only goal is to gain more than he gives.

“You’ve read me right, Will. I’m curious about you, and what you do. And you need a very good excuse to linger in these halls where you’re not meant to be. What better reason than a scandal, but one that’s just plausible enough to mask your true intentions?”

Will is quiet for a moment. Then his mouth pops open, and there is a furious and fascinated expression that overcomes him. “You want to use me.”

Will Graham’s mind is a drug, and terrible satisfaction is its side effect. Hannibal is vibrant with it, a half-step removed from a natural high. “You started it, Will. I’m now simply making you an offer.”

Will’s jaw goes slack, but he is sharp with calculation. Even as he works to find words, his gaze flickers and settles on Hannibal, his thoughts skipping to every permutation of their unusual circumstance. Every terrible consideration—and every heated desire. Color rises in his cheeks. Hannibal is content to wait, if only to watch him burn from the box seats.

“So—what, you *study* me?” Will asks. He bristles, vibrates, snaps and snarls with offense and intrigue. “An all-access pass to the freakshow?”

There is a killer instinct in Will Graham that he'd like to cultivate; a gauntlet yet to run, to be shared between just them two. "I only thought to ask the pleasure of your company."

Red lips curl into a fearsome sneer. If Will were not so lovely, others might find the aggression ugly. But Hannibal sees all sides of him—not just the sides Will makes public and displays in shapely silhouettes and pigmented ink.

"Yes, I'm sure you'd like that." Will's nose wrinkles; he does not look nearly as disgusted as he'd like to think. "One body doesn't guarantee a trail, Doctor Lecter. Mr. Caldwell's remains being released to this hospital was a fluke. If it doesn't happen again, I won't have any reason to bother with you."

His words are shaped to wound, but Will is painfully transparent.

"You would be, of course, free to end this arrangement at any time." Hannibal glances down at his nails, picks an imaginary speck of lint from his scrubs. He picks up his paperwork from the Medical Examiner's desk, folds it, and places it into the breast pocket of his white doctor's coat. "And I would ask nothing more from you than you're willing to give."

Will's nostrils flare, searching to catch Hannibal's scent as though it will lead him to the inner workings of his mind. "What exactly do you think I'm willing to *give* you? You're awfully presumptive, Doctor."

Hannibal quirks a brow. "You've already given me some of your time. I'm a doctor of quite some standing within this institution, Will. As such, I'm expected to present a certain… persona." Hannibal tastes the word on his teeth, the distaste lingering in the back of his mind. "Social functions cultivated for the donors of Johns Hopkins, where they might rub elbows with their best and brightest and be assured that their generosity is properly appreciated. Dinners and fundraisers and charity events. Glamorous proceedings for those not accustomed to excess. All attended by the sorts of people who might be useful references to you, invaluable networking opportunities."

Will huffs a bitter laugh. "People like that don't know how to react to people like me. Anything that exceeds their ideas of a so-called *binary existence* is a threat to them. What would they think of *you* for keeping company with *me?"*

Hannibal's lip curls. The idea that he might set stock in the opinions of sheep is beneath him, and frankly, beneath Will. "I care very little for what they think of me, beyond what use it has to my position here," Hannibal answers, abrupt and flat. "Let me be transparent, Will, so we need not dance around the subject: the kind of access you seek is something even seasoned journalists would struggle to attain without connections. I will provide those to you, and an alibi. If you become known as someone who *keeps company* with me, no one will question you running simple errands and stopping into places you would otherwise not be allowed to go. You'll become a fixture within these walls, rather than a stranger worthy of suspicion. The more you are trusted, the more you can get away with. That is what I offer to you."

Will watches him for some time, backlit by the cold light of the fluorescent light reflecting off metal. He taps his manicured nails on the doors. The sound is not unlike a ticking clock, denoting the passage of time as he weighs Hannibal's words. Hannibal can practically hear the whirring of his thoughts.

Finally, Will steps forward. He dips to collect his bag and haul it over his shoulder, and for a moment, Hannibal thinks he might walk out. He imagines trying to stop Will, and the consequences therein. But, no—if Will decides to go, Hannibal must let him. It would be, after all, perhaps the most clever mind of all that avoided this game entirely.

But Will doesn't leave.

He approaches, slow and measured, until he's an arm's reach away. Like this, between his considerable height and the addition of his heeled boots, it forces Hannibal to look up at him. It's an attempted intimidation—the black queen staring down at the white pawn while it considers its certain doom.

Hannibal patiently awaits the day when Will becomes aware that the *inverse* is true.

"And you want to give me all this out of the goodness of your heart?" Will asks softly, warningly, with a hint of a wry and dangerous smile. "All for *the pleasure of my company?* Giving me an out to end this arrangement whenever I please? You know what it sounds like you're asking for, right?"

Hannibal tips his head back, an imitation of Will's technique. He bares his throat, though the beast inside his skin itches with how *wrong* it feels—but silently revels in the hunger it sees reflected back at him. "You've captured my interest, Will. Believe me when I say that this will be just as beneficial to me. A suspected lover would relieve the weight of societal expectation on my shoulders. Attempted matchmaking from my acquaintances is tiresome and uncomfortable. Dating anyone within my employ would be inappropriate and nearly impossible with the hours that I keep."

Will laughs once. He shakes his head incredulously, which ruffles the curls that fall across his forehead. "So I'd become your on-call pet *psychology project.* Attach myself to your gilded leash so your nurses stop asking you out in the lunchroom. I let you play dress-up with me on the weekends, and *you* let *me* make connections with your blue-blooded friends and run around the hospital to my heart's content. And throughout all that…" Will takes another step forward. His thighs nearly brush Hannibal's knees, the pale canvas of his neck and collar bones at eye-level. Casual temptation as he shrugs his jacket off and ties it around his trim waist, and he watches Hannibal deliberately follow the stilted motion of his hands, hindered by the presence of Will's cast. "What do you expect me to give you within the context of our *relationship?"*

"We need only be as physical with each other as it takes to be convincing," Hannibal says. His eyes drag up Will's body, button by button of his shirt, his chest, his throat, his jaw, his eyes. His attraction to Will is no secret, and neither is Will's to him—but such a heavy-handed coercion would be tasteless and not worthy of Will's intellect. "Though we should be seen in public together outside of solely hospital functions. I will, of course, cover the costs of whatever outings we may take together, as well as your transportation if it's needed."

Will nudges one leg forward, presses it against Hannibal's—there is a challenge in his eyes. Hannibal is not one for losing. He allows his legs to fall open, create a truly rude amount of space between them that Will has no hesitation in filling.

Will rests his forearms atop Hannibal's shoulders, just above the edge of his cast. There is the soft sound of skin as he laces his fingers together behind Hannibal's head. He is near, so near, so warm as he looms close, eyes half-lidded and weighty with consideration. He looks down and Hannibal looks up. The saccharine scent of the lip gloss clings to Will's skin, even now that it has been wiped away.

There is nothing Hannibal would like more than he move as he likes, to seize his urge to act upon the intrigue he senses in the empty space between their bodies. Instead, he parries Will's blow by curling his palms around Will's waist, resting on the comfortable ridge that awful jacket creates. He raises his eyebrows in unconcerned query, even as he drinks his fill of Will's burning heat so close to him. He had likened the morgue to the gates of Hell, but without any warning, Will has consumed and become the Sun itself.

He is determined not to break the silence first. Whatever gambit Will is playing, he must wait Will out to ascertain his strategy. Not all with Will is as it seems—Hannibal has already learned that lesson once today.

Hannibal is perfectly still when Will's fingers brush the fine fuzz at the nape of his neck and thread into his hair. He counts it as a personal accomplishment. The monster in his bones snaps and snarls; his instincts regard Will's hands as weapons whose origins and intentions he is uncertain of.

"Soft," Will murmurs, and his voice fills every vacant inch between them.

Hannibal is tugging on the threads that hold himself together, pulling them tighter. Will seems determined to pick him apart at the seams. Their conversation is inconsequential—a moment's reprieve. "Hair products are not allowed in the operating room. Otherwise, I usually prefer to use hair gel."

Will grins; Hannibal has no time at all to prepare himself for Will's fingers running wildly through the strands, disturbing the shape and raising shivers on Hannibal's scalp, zinging with electricity at the brush of well-shaped fingernails.

Hannibal reacts. He catches Will's wrist in a punishing grip, breathes through his nose to steady his heartbeat and is quietly infuriated when Will doesn't so much as blink at the bruising force.

Instead, his grin grows wider. "Careful, Doctor," he purrs, "or you'll break my other hand, and then I'll need you to do *everything* for me."

Hannibal does not yet release him. The self-satisfied look in Will's eyes is a loss; Will has ruffled him. Of course he has, the terrible thing. But Hannibal hasn't been touched so casually perhaps *ever* in his life.

Not since—

"Relax," Will says, and some of his childish glee relaxes into smug amusement. He wiggles his fingers, and his tendons flex in Hannibal's palm. "If I'm going to make myself unavailable so I can become your fake girlfriend, I want to make sure I like the way you feel. You're gonna have to get used to me touching you too, you know."

The word *girlfriend* rings like a bell in Hannibal's mind. He frowns as he lets Will go, and his hand falls to the desk beside him, does not return to Will's waist as half of him desires to. "Would you prefer that I refer to you with female pronouns? I understand you were under duress the first time I asked. I'd like to ensure you're comfortable."

This seems to surprise Will; he flexes his fingers again, then lowers his hand back to Hannibal's shoulder. The side of his thumb brushes the curve of Hannibal's neck, just barely starting to prickle with the fresh growth since he'd shaved this morning. Hannibal knows from experience that Will covers what shadow he acquires under the layer of his foundation. He focuses on that instead of the feeling.

Will shrugs; he lips pressed into a grimace, a wrinkle between the bold but clean shapes of his brows. "I don't really care about pronouns. I don't *like* any of them, but…" Will breaks eye contact. That questioning his gender, of all things, would bring Will to a stuttering halt proves to Hannibal that he is conflicted over it.

It doesn't feel like a win. Hannibal feels a strange twinge of something that might be *guilt.*

Will takes a breath, shallow and uncertain. He's still so near; he presses his leg outward against Hannibal's thigh, almost a nervous gesture, but makes no move to pull away—so Hannibal nudges him back. Not so different from a reassuring squeeze of a hand.

And Will *relaxes.* Sighs in a huff, then starts again. "I don't like being called strictly male or female, but I don't like any of the other pronouns, either. *He* is familiar, so I don't notice it as much. But sometimes my brain doesn't really click with it. It's like…"

Will tips his head back, glances up at the ceiling. He heaves an exhale that Hannibal feels move against his fingers, the expansion and contraction of Will's delicate ribs against his palm. They would crack so easily, he knows. A resilient cage of bone that contains the sources of his life. His stomach. His lungs. His heart.

Perhaps Will's *exterior* is a cage for him as well. In that regard, Hannibal can understand his struggle.

"It's like," Will says again, his thumb still following that maddening path over Hannibal's carotid, "there are two of me. And we don't agree on what we are. Sure, we're *here,* and we get along okay. There's never just *one* of us in control—we both hear, we both react. I have one thought process, one name, but I timeshare with myself. When I wake up in the morning, what I do lays the foundation for who I am that day. But sometimes it switches unexpectedly, and it's like waking up in the wrong skin."

Will laughs. The sound is pained, his smile flickering and sad as he looks down, looks to Hannibal, looks for his reaction. "It's crazy, right? It's not dissociative. I always know who I am. It just *feels* wrong sometimes. I don't know what to call that."

"Dysphoria," Hannibal says, and Will is shaking his head before he's even finished saying it. "Perhaps some other manner of dissociation."

"No, it's not either of those, it's different," Will replies. His face is cracked open on a broken little smile. Then, like a switch flipped, he inhales. His expression smooths. He tucks his feelings away behind the wall inside himself.

Hannibal wants to break him open and see it again.

"But no, I don't care about pronouns. I'm not a boy or a girl, a he or she, they or them. But calling me *he* is just fine." Abruptly, Will's thumb stops. His hand slips to the outer curve of Hannibal's shoulder and rests there, and he meets Hannibal's eyes. "I won't always look pretty, you know. I don't do this all the time. It's conditional that you've only seen me dressed up and nice. It's not always that way, and I'm not going to change myself for you."

Hannibal blinks slowly. There are layers to Will Graham that he had not strictly anticipated, but he certainly can't say he's disappointed. He glances down to the hunter's jacket tied around Will's hips; perhaps it simply belongs to Will because he likes it. It is an adjustment to his thought process, but not an unwelcome one. Will is a puzzle, and Hannibal is continuing to connect the edge pieces before filling him in. "I would not expect you to."

There is the slightest prickle of nails as Will's fingers curl. Out of the corner of his eye, Hannibal sees a pinkish smear across the back of his knuckles. Femininity and brash confidence, combined in the shell of something bold, something new.

"The other thing," Will says, and his voice goes flat and hard. "I have a condition for this arrangement."

That's more like it. Hannibal smiles slightly; the sight of it makes Will's eyes narrow. "Your terms?"

"I won't have my career ruined before it starts," Will warns. "I don't want my name appearing anywhere in any paper or any medical journal. Anything you write must be abstracted beyond recognition, and before you so much as *think* of submitting anything for consideration, I want to read it—whether or not you think I'll understand it."

"Accepted," Hannibal says without hesitation. The arrangement he has proposed with Will would be in *extremely* poor taste—and a borderline violation of ethics—if it were to come out that Hannibal's research was not performed in a doctor-patient setting. It could be career-ending for them both. "Anything else?"

Will blinks at the rapid acceptance—had he expected his common sense to raise an argument? "Um—I mean, my grades are important. I have a full course schedule."

"I will give you my email and you may send it to me. I have no intention of being unreasonable, Will. This arrangement should benefit us both. I would very much like it to."

Will hesitates. He nods. Uncertainty plays across his face, and his unsheathed claws in Hannibal's shoulder relax and subside. He glances down as though he hadn't noticed doing it in the first place, and fretfully pets over the spot as though to soothe the hurt.

And then he stills. Will takes a slow, measured inhale, and meets Hannibal's eyes. He is unfailingly lovely in his hesitancy, his open and tentative expression. With one hand steady on Will's waist, the other slips beneath the drape of Will's jacket to settle on his hip, to scritch his nails ever-so-gently over the body-warm denim.

Will's pupils fatten; his eyes sharpen with attentiveness. His lips part, still faintly pink. He touches the expanse of Hannibal's shoulder. His fingers stumble down his back, returns to clench in the back of the collar of Hannibal's white doctor jacket. Then Will smooths over that, too—trails his nails along Hannibal's hairline until he reaches his jaw. Electricity follows Will's caress, entrancing beyond explanation, leaving trails of fire in his wake. The calluses on his palm are old, raised but made soft through careful care. His bone structure is proportional, well-formed and strong—an artist's hands.

And where Will's bones have broken, and even now regain their strength, he evolves. His hands will become a hunter's.

No matter the context or the cost, Hannibal thinks he would gladly consume Will Graham whole.

Will's fingers curve around the sharp angle of Hannibal's cheek in a confident touch more befitting of a long-time lover. The weight of his other arm shifts with the cast, the pads of his broken fingers drag downward, dip under the lapel of Hannibal's coat.

"You protect my interests," Will murmurs. "And I'll protect yours. Even Steven."

Will kisses him.

He tastes of artificial cherry, tart and sweet, and his eyes glimmer with clever light until his lashes flutter closed. His lips are sticky, and the pull of their breathless separation and convergence is ripe with texture. Hannibal's hand clenches on Will's hip, threads two fingers into Will's belt loop to drag him closer, and Will pushes their bodies together in a slide of beautiful friction. Will's fingernails are a bright sting on Hannibal's face and he holds too hard, insistently tilts Hannibal's chin for a better angle. He laps at Hannibal's mouth, encouraging, *demanding* —

“Um, what the *hell* are you doing in here?” someone says, and Hannibal pulls away from Will with a snarl building in his chest. When his head whips to the source of the sound, it’s a familiar face that waits, wide-eyed and pink-cheeked, brows raised in irritated shock.

Ah, right. The medical examiner; Price-something, Hannibal’s sure. He can’t currently find it in him to care.

But he schools his face into an appropriate expression: surprised, embarrassed. He searches for a response, but finds he doesn’t need one, because—

Will moans in pure, raw mortification and hides his face in Hannibal’s shoulder. “Oh my *god,”* he whines, and peeks up at Doctor Price. “I am *so* sorry.”

Will’s hands encircle Hannibal’s wrists, and as he reels back, he pulls Hannibal up after him with surprising strength. Hannibal has only a second to catch the flash of something *satisfied* in Will’s face before he’s back to his demure display, scuffing his toe on the floor like a chastised child as he tucks himself under Hannibal’s arm. Shoulders bunched around his ears, head ducked, Will’s demeanor is not unlike a kicked puppy.

“I just,” Will says softly, apologetically, and glances at their intruder, “We stopped in to pick up his paperwork and it’s been *all day* and I wasn’t thinking. It won’t happen again, I *swear.* God, I’m so embarrassed.”

Price stares at Will. His eyes flicker to Hannibal and back. The force of Will’s performance is staggering, and Hannibal does his best to appropriately echo it.

“The morgue?” Price demands, grimacing. “I mean, really?”

“It’s not very well done of me, I’ll admit,” Hannibal concedes, and curls his arm around Will’s shoulders in a show of protectiveness and comfort.

Price nods in dumb agreement. Then he stands aside and holds the door open. “Alright, get *out.* Don’t make it a habit or I’ll file a report.”

Hannibal should count himself lucky Price isn’t planning on filing one for the first offense. Instead, all he can feel is irritation at the interruption. “Duly noted.”

Will skitters out the doorway, giggling with mortified frenzy like a teenager as he pulls Hannibal along behind him. The effect of it seems to soften Price’s expression, and as Hannibal passes, he says, “Just use one of the supply closets next time or something. *Not* my office, thank you very much.”

“I’m *really* sorry,” Will repeats, a sweetly anxious flush darkening his cheeks.

Price scoffs and shakes his head. Lingering in the hallway, Will shuffles in place before he darts forward and places a quick, chaste kiss on Hannibal’s cheek. The scent of cherry overwhelms the antiseptic, and Will’s hand skims down the outside of Hannibal’s arm, curling their fingers together, even as he pulls away and apart.

“I’ve got to go catch up with Bev,” Will says with a helpless smile. Hannibal stares at him, at the approximation of flustered joy and the way it paints Will in shades of pink, rich bronze of his restrained curls, glimmering green-blue for his eyes.

There is something sharp inside that gaze, calculating and pleased as Will plays the part of a lover, bubbly and sweet as champagne. Will walks backwards, one slow step at a time like he can’t bear to

be parted from Hannibal, lit from the inside with affection and magnetism that longs to pull them back together.

What strange and glorious happenstance he's found in Will Graham—a long last, the potential for a familiar mind as unpredictable and changing as he.

"So soon?" Hannibal asks with a faint shadow of a frown. He and Will still have much to talk about.

"Don't worry so much," Will says and *winks*. "I'll call you later. I'll be at Knight Hall until late, so don't worry if you miss my message, ok? Just call me back when you can."

Hannibal has no doubt that Will means as he says; given what he's managed here today, he's surely resourceful enough to have gotten Hannibal's phone number.

Hannibal will simply have to… trust him.

Hannibal absolutely does *not* trust him—but he *does* believe him.

"Alright," he says, all polite disappointment and terrible fondness for the eyes of their witness. He finds it is only half a lie. "Drive safely."

"Yes, dear," Will teases lightly, and Hannibal absolutely *does not* smile as Will walks away.

(He does.)

"Wow," Price says, and raises his eyebrows as he shoots Hannibal a sidelong look. "Where'd you find that one?"

Hannibal shakes his head once in wonderment that is not entirely feigned. "The emergency room."

Price snorts. "Figures." His eyes narrow with a sly, satisfied smile. "Your hair's all messed up, by the way."

Hannibal sighs.

Well, he supposes, that's one way to introduce Will to his coworkers.

Chapter End Notes

reblog on tumblr

1:6

Chapter Notes

> Sorry for the delay! Took a few days to hang with friends, but I'll hopefully get back to my daily or every-other-day schedule. Hopefully this make up for it. :*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hannibal's shift crawls by. He operates with his usual level of efficiency, but his mind wanders. It is a fortunate thing indeed that he is accomplished at compartmentalization, lest his patients suffer—but they don't.

His replacement arrives at one in the morning. Hannibal is one of the rare few surgeons who frequently signs up to work shifts in excess of ten hours, though such shifts are not uncommon for the nurses; a considerable portion of his reputation was earned from shared long hours and consecutive days. However, with his intention to restart his residency in psychiatry, he will need to cut back and rearrange his schedule, though he's not yet made arrangements to do so.

Fortunately, he is not needed for another thirty-six hours, and he intends to make them count.

And when he reaches his personal locker to collect his belongings, he is pleased to find a message waiting from an unknown number.

> >> I know I said I'd call, but then I thought about it and realized your phone might be ringing in the break room and that would be annoying.
>
> >>I should be here working until after midnight, so don't worry about waking me up. Bev says you're an ER tryhard and work 12+ hour shifts almost every day, which I guess I should have expected.

Hannibal raises his brows at the screen, then presses the *dial* button with a huff. It rings three, four, five times, and for a moment, Hannibal is concerned that perhaps Will *has* fallen asleep—

"This is Will. Oh, goddamn it—" there is the sound of tumbling, a sudden thump on the line, followed by distant cursing.

Hannibal's brows creep upward, but his lips also curl in the shadow of a smile. Such terrible language. He checks his pockets for his belongings as he waits for Will to recover from whatever mishap he's experiencing, then sets out toward the parking garage.

When Will's voice comes, it's hushed and urgent, rougher than Hannibal usually hears it. It sounds closer to how Will spoke while empathizing with the corpse of Andrew Caldwell. *"Damn it. Sorry. Still there?"*

"Yes, I'm still here," Hannibal replies. He frowns. "Having difficulties?"

*"More like running for my life. I posted my article about the Ripper and Freddie doesn't **actually** know who wrote it, and of course I VPN'd it six ways from Sunday and uploaded it from off campus on my anonymous tablet on public wifi, but I just heard her storm into the building and she's out for blood. But she can't confirm it was me if she can't catch me, so I'm on the move."*

Hannibal is fairly certain he understands what Will said, but given the speed and the volume at which he's speaking, he is only *mostly* positive. He is hit with a deep sense of intrigue. What is it that Will's written? "Does she intimidate you so much?"

*"Honestly, I'm way more worried about the FBI. Freddie can't do shit, but if they come around asking questions, she'll be the first one to point fingers. I wouldn't put it past her to contact **them** to report me. I should get a burner cell."*

The thought is amusing and troubling. "Should you have waited another day or two before posting your article to put distance between the events of this afternoon and your publication?"

*"If I waited any longer, Freddie was gonna get there first. She totally slept with Zeller and got her hands on the autopsy report probably two or three hours after I did. I had to do it. Hopefully I'll be able to be more careful from here on out. The metadata should say the article posted from Wilmington, so that should buy me some time from anyone **but** her."*

Hannibal hums in amusement as he crosses into the dark din of the parking garage. "I'm surprised you would allow your rival to know you well enough to identify you by writing style alone."

"It has more to do with my deductions." Will's voice is breathless and distracting in his ear. His passion for the Ripper is a balm for Hannibal's ego—it's fortunate indeed that he has plans for further displays, for gathering a broader span of Will's opinion. *"I've argued with her too many times, so she knows about the way I think. It's too unique. She can pick my reports out of a crowd because no one thinks the way I do."*

"I see. That's the price of notoriety, I'm afraid. One moment Will, I have to start my car." His lips twitch as he approaches the Bentley; unlocks it and climbs inside, sets his briefcase and go-bag in the passenger seat. The engine turns over, and in a handful of seconds, his phone is picked up by the Bluetooth speaker. "Still with me?"

"Yeah, I'm here," Will says. His voice fills the space around Hannibal, and though the sound quality isn't particularly high, it's easier to imagine that Will is present. *"Sorry, I realize you probably didn't call to listen to me bitch after you did me a favor. I should be thanking you."*

"Fortunate career happenings and the resulting stress are not mutually exclusive. Though I assume there has been some unusual happenstance for you to be running from your peer." Hannibal directs himself out of the parking garage and heads for home. The thought of his own bed is unusually attractive, but he has also had an unexpectedly eventful day, and the hour is quite late.

"You'll see when you get home. Or maybe on the morning news." There is the slam of a car door, and Will spends a few moments simply breathing.

Hannibal listens with rapt fascination, and hums with surprise when he hears the sound of another car's ignition. Strange—he had assumed Will lived on campus. "Fleeing in a vehicle?" He asks with some measure of amusement.

Will laughs. *"Yeah, I'm going home. Maybe it's a good thing we keep the same schedule."*

He hums. He tries to picture Will's living situation, but finds he does not yet know enough about Will to imagine anything concrete. "Where do you live?"

"Suppose you'll find out soon enough anyway—I have a house in Wolf Trap, Virginia."

Hannibal makes a faint sound of surprise. "A house? You're quite young to be a homeowner."

Will snorts in return. *"Yeah, tell me about it. But my dad had a retirement fund and life insurance that I inherited when he died. I probably could have sold the place to pay for school, but…"* Will trails off into contemplative silence, both fond and sad. *"I don't know. I never had a stable home, so I guess I liked the idea of it. There's lots of land. Room to wander. A river where I can fish."*

More and more surprises. Hannibal pauses at a red light and wonders what Will's own drive home must be like. If he remembers it correctly, Wolf Trap is a rural town. Hannibal has only ever seen Will fairly put-together—not the sort to go traipsing out into a field. More puzzle pieces fill in, another corner of Will's life taking shape. "You fish?"

"All my life. Grew up on the water and the bayous outside New Orleans. Only things I have left of my dad are his boat and his dog."

Hannibal enters his familiar brownstone neighborhood, civilized and urban. What would it be like to live in the country? He finds he can't imagine it anymore. He's grown so accustomed to city life—Paris, Florence, Baltimore. "You are a collage of fascinating circumstances, Will."

Will laughs. Even over the tinny line, the sound is rich, smoky and warming like whiskey. *"You know, maybe I'm just over-tired, so I'll admit I was nervous about all this. But you're surprisingly easy to talk to. Maybe it's because we don't know anything about each other. Are you sure you won't get bored when the mysteries stop flowing in?"*

Quite sure. Hannibal pulls into his driveway and pulls into the garage, putting the Bentley in park. He lifts his phone off the passenger seat and disconnects from the Bluetooth speaker, holding the phone back to his ear. "Are you sure you'll ever run out of mysteries?"

He turns off the car lets himself inside, operating one-handed as he goes through the empty house. *"No one can keep up mystique and wonder forever. Someday you'll see me covered in mud and fish guts and run away screaming. Or maybe you'll just see me without my makeup on, it's practically the same thing."*

The words startle a sharp laugh from Hannibal as he steps out of his shoes. He places his keys in a bowl by the door, then makes a quick stop in the kitchen to wash out the glass dish he'd used for his packed lunch, extracted from his bag. "I've already seen you without your makeup, Will, and I have not found you lacking. Not to mention if blood and guts were enough to run me off, Doctor Gideon would have my office and I'm sure I would have less punishing hours."

"Doctor Gideon may get your office yet if we're not careful," Will says. He sounds like he's smiling. *"I'd apologize for attacking you without warning earlier, but you didn't seem to be complaining."*

"Your distractionary techniques are brutally efficient," Hannibal replies, reveling in Will's pleased murmur as he turns the water off and sets the dish aside. He heads for the stairs, intent on freeing himself from his day-worn scrubs. "In fact, it would seem quite a shame to discourage you from them. Have you ever considered acting as a career path?"

“Not even once,” Will says. Now that he’s away from the source of his stress, Will seems to be in quite a good mood. *“Though I’m glad you think my performance is good enough to warrant that sort of thing. It bodes well for your reputation—or poorly for it, depending on how you look at the situation.”*

Hannibal can hear the soft *whirr* of his tires against the road. The sound of it is soothing; he’s always enjoyed driving, though not the stop-and-go of heavy traffic. Perhaps he’ll visit Will at home, sometime—get a sense for him and the place in which he lives. “Rumors were spreading by the time I left. What did you say to Miss Katz?”

Will practically purrs. *“I didn’t have to say anything at all. She saw my lip gloss was all fucked up and told me I was banned from ever bothering her for access ever again now that I’m, and I quote, ‘banging a hot doctor whose salary is worth more than her entire mortal soul’, end quote. Then she made me buy her lunch for her trouble.”*

Hannibal smirks to himself. “I appreciate her sentiment, even if it’s a bit premature.”

*“A **bit?** ”* Will asks archly. *“Why, Doctor, I think you may be overestimating your timeline. I have it on good authority that a proper gentleman would only ask for the pleasure of my company.”*

“Your company is a pleasure all its own.” Hannibal turns on each of the lights in his room and sits on the edge of the bed. He pins his phone between his shoulder and ear, then reaches for the tablet on his bedside table. He waits for it to boot up with grating impatience and terrible indulgence. “How far is your drive?”

“Maybe half an hour. It’s not too bad. I like driving.”

“I share the sentiment, though I’ll admit, I’m surprised you live quite so far.”

“Having second thoughts already?”

“Not at all. Simply recalibrating my timeline to account for the commute.” The joke at his own expense is worth the warmth of Will’s laugh. Hannibal waits as his tablet powers on and loads slowly, so slowly. “So, what news is it of yours that I should be looking for? You’ve piqued my curiosity, and I’m fascinated in seeing how your gift translates from mind to paper.”

“Oh—you really don’t have to read it,” Will says, and sounds fretful. *“It’s just college journalism. Not exactly Pulitzer material.”*

“Will,” Hannibal replies with carefully-constructed patience, “each award-winning writer was once an amateur. I would like to read your work, if you would let me.”

“If I don’t tell you, you’re just going to go looking for it, aren’t you?”

Hannibal smirks to himself. “Perhaps.”

“Well, I can at least be comfortable in the fact that under normal circumstances you wouldn’t find it.” Will laughs, and Hannibal feels a flicker of irritation before he continues, *“But I’ll tell you. You deserve to know.”*

“Are you self-conscious about your writing, Will?” Hannibal asks. He frowns down at the open, empty browser. The cursor blinks at him, unyielding.

“You’re not a psychiatrist yet, Doctor Lecter.”

“You told me you had no use for a psychiatrist.”

*“Correct. So **don’t** psychoanalyze me.”* Will’s voice is not quite cold, but certainly firm. *“You won’t like me when I’m psychoanalyzed.”*

Hannibal thinks he would very much like to psychoanalyze Will, no matter how heavily the threat of his retribution looms. He would take any retaliation Will saw fit to give.

“So do you want to read my article on psychoanalyzing, or what?”

Hannibal drums his fingers on the back of his tablet. Will rides a fine line between entertainingly and distastefully rude. And then he realizes: no one else has ever been amusing to him in their rudeness before. Will Graham is… set apart.

“Yes, I would like to read it.”

“No laughing at my domain name, or I’ll block you. Not everyone can get a URL as snappy as tattlecrime dot com.”

Hannibal’s tapping nails fall still. “Tattle—” The realization comes swift and sudden. “Your classmate is Freddie Lounds?”

Will makes an exclamation of sudden outrage and offense. *“Oh God, not you too.”*

“I hadn’t made the connection, though now I’m surprised that I didn’t make it sooner.” Hannibal lifts the phone away from his face and frowns at it, Will’s unhappy sigh a wave of crackling static in his ear. “Her posts are sensationalist nonsense, but her coverage is prompt. I wasn’t aware Freddie Lounds is a student.”

The comment seems to draw Will’s ire away from Hannibal and back to Freddie. That, at least, is a small mercy. He’d prefer to avoid upsetting Will—the closer their thought processes seem to align, the easier it will be to gain his trust. The more Will trusts him, the easier it will become to understand him, anticipate him, and divert him if necessary.

“Of course not. The less people know about her, the easier it is for her to pretend she’s not who she is and manipulate people into getting what she wants. This is all Ethics 101, which Freddie failed. Repeatedly.”

“I assume you are speaking metaphorically.”

“I mean—yeah, she didn’t actually fail Ethics. You have to know the rules before you break them with such extreme prejudice.” Will sighs heavily, and there is a distant sound of clicking: a turn signal. The crunch of wheels on pavement accelerates again. *“I guess I don’t have any room to talk.”*

Hannibal hums thoughtfully. “You’ve demonstrated a certain regard for minimizing harm for those impacted by your stories, rather than exacerbating it. I believe that gives you some amount of moral high ground.”

“And maybe someday I’ll believe you when you say it, once you’ve known me for more than, like, six hours total.” Will goes quiet for a moment. Then he sighs. *“Jesus Christ, what am I doing?”*

Hannibal assumes he is not speaking in regards to driving home, or passing judgement on Freddie Lounds, or even posting his article and all its mysteries that caused him to flee from his work space in the middle of the night.

And then Will murmurs, *"Agreeing to this, doing this with you. Getting into bed together, even in a figurative sense—I don't know anything about you, Hannibal."*

Will's use of his first name is a punch to the gut. Alone in his austere bedroom and empty home, Hannibal swallows. The screen of the tablet goes dark with disuse where it rests on his thighs. Slowly, silently, Hannibal lays back until his spine is flat on his mattress and he is staring at the ceiling, the sound of Will's car humming through the phone at his ear. "All relationships, no matter how significant or long-lasting, begin with the introduction of strangers."

"You don't know the way my life has been. To meet someone successful and well-connected who wants to do what you're offering for me, asking comparatively nothing in return—it's a hard pill to swallow. I didn't stay alive this long because I trusted strangers, I survived because I was pragmatic. And yet, here I am…" Will laughs, the sound hollow, distant, self-deprecating. *"Talking to you at one-thirty in the morning."*

Hannibal reaches up to hold his phone properly, and his eyes slip closed. The dull glow of his bedroom lights filter red through the thin membrane of his eyelids. The words he comes up with sound coaxing and clever within the echoing hallways of his mind, but when they escape his lips, they simply sound… exposed. Raw, like a nerve. "You're not the only one breaking patterns tonight."

Perhaps it is more clever altogether to make himself sound vulnerable, whether or not he intends it—because Will sighs when he hears it, and says, *"You know, there's not much different about pretending to be in a relationship with someone and actually* ***being*** *in one. I'll need to know you. You'll need to know me."*

Hannibal's eyes open. "Does the idea discomfit you?"

"Incredibly. You?"

Hannibal laughs quietly. He tips his head back against the sheets and listens to Will's voice in his ear, the way it starts to drawl as Will grows tired and uncertain. The shadow of the South has left an impression on Will. Hannibal knows that his motherland has made its own impressions on him. "Yes, very much."

Will hums, and the sound vibrates against Hannibal's cheek like a caress. It's easy to imagine Will here, lying beside him with his slender legs dangling off the bed and brushing against his own, the way Will wears his sly slip of a smile like armor. It's easier yet to imagine the way his curls might pool around his head, a bronze and bright halo against the blue of Hannibal's bedclothes, his eyes radiant and azure to match.

In his mind's eye, he can picture Will on his other side, dyed red with blood, saturated up to his elbows like the finest evening gloves. His glossy lips here are wet, crimson, dripping, spread open on a sigh. In the private gallery of Hannibal's thoughts, Will's throat is mottled with bruises shaped like Hannibal's teeth, hot with fevered want beneath steady surgeon's hands; he sings odes to death with the sweetness of his moans.

Two sides of Will. Two sides of Hannibal. And both craving, *longing* to find their worthy match. In order to be Seen, Hannibal must first make himself Known. It is an uncomfortable realization indeed, but no conqueror ever reigned without first overcoming all opposition, both external and internal.

Hannibal himself is just another enemy to be conquered in the battle for Will Graham.

"But I have faith you're worth the risk, personally and professionally."

Will makes a wounded little noise that is barely even there over the hum of his vehicle, but Hannibal hears it. He pins it down with a monster's claws and carries it off to the safe place inside his mind palace, the fountain oasis made to hold everything to do with Will. He is a lost, wandering thing following a trail of bodies to find his place in the world. If that is what he seeks, Hannibal will lay him a path, and ensure Will knows its destination by the end.

"Why?" Will asks. *"Why me?"*

Hannibal blinks at his ceiling, turns his head and looks at his solitary reflection in the mirror mounted across from his bed. He wonders at the portrait they might make, exposed and resting there together; something rich and bold like the paintings of Veronese. Will is a force of untempered beauty and power to rival Venus herself.

He is a classic tableau worthy of the old masters—worthy of Hannibal.

"You are sharp and spirited. Driven. Clever. I wish to see the impact you'll have on the world from up close, if you'll allow it." Hannibal replies. Regardless if Will deigns to allow him, Hannibal will find a way to see him live and thrive outside the chains society has laid upon him. "To that end, Will, why me? I feel I'm not mistaken in thinking whatever magnetism lies here goes both ways."

Will is silent for a while. If not for the rumble of his tires on the distant, unnamed road, Hannibal might have thought he hung up. His tablet is now all but forgotten. Whatever news it is that Will has broken tonight will still be there in the morning; he'll be content to wait all night if he must.

"You see me as a person," Will says finally. *"When I talk, I know you hear me. You don't just nod along like an idiot, you listen and ask me questions. And earlier, when I… when I told you about how I am, the way I think, you didn't look afraid of me, or worried about my wellbeing. You didn't pity me. You didn't tell me I had a problem that could be fixed. I'm a puzzle you want to solve because you want to see the image I make, not because you think my pieces are a mess. I don't know if I'm making sense. But you don't even have to think about it or try, you just… do. I'm not a trendy commodity or some weird fetish attraction, and I'm not something immoral and distasteful when you look at me. You look at me like you want me because I'm interesting."*

Hannibal inhales and exhales slowly. "Is it really so atypical, that you noticed me because I treat you like an equal?"

"Yes," Will whispers, barely a breath of sound.

Hannibal ruminates on how long it might take to find every person who has ever made Will feel like an inferior being. It is a terrible shame that most of them probably don't have business cards—and that even if he killed one a day for the rest of his life, he'd likely not reach them all.

Will is not a person. Hannibal would never call him something so tasteless and insulting.

"Maybe that's why I'm chasing this killer," he adds. *"I wonder how long it's been since anyone looked at him and saw him for who he is. If he was just killing for himself, he wouldn't display them. His murders are trials for public consumption. He wants someone to share it with. I think he's probably been doing this for a really long time and got tired of being alone."*

It feels like a lead weight is sitting on Hannibal's chest. "You believe he's lonely?"

"He probably wouldn't call it that. He'd probably just call it boredom. But it's the same thing, right? This is what he does: he hunts and kills, an instinct and a hobby. But it ***is*** *lonely, being the only person*

who does what you do—who can appreciate your hard work, no matter how bloody it is. It comes with a sort of... dull ache."

An empty bed. An empty home. Hannibal has always preferred his solitude, back when he believed no one would ever understand because they were incapable of doing so. If he had to explain, it would ruin the meaning. With Will, he doesn't *have* to explain. He just… sees.

"Do you feel alone, Will?"

Will makes a quiet sound: it's not what Hannibal expects. It's tentative and wistful—almost warm. *"I'm starting not to."*

Hannibal sits upright at long last. He glances down at the tablet on his lap and, finally, sets it back on his bedside table. His plans for tomorrow can be put on hold—ideas, unlike meat, will keep. Too, perhaps Will's article is better consumed on a well-rested mind, especially given how much of his attention the writer himself demands.

"Yes," Hannibal says, "I believe I know what you mean."

Chapter End Notes

reblog

1:7

Chapter Notes

So. This thing developed a plot, which was pretty unexpected. THAT SAID, this chapter includes Will's POV! The rest of the fic will include glimpses into the minds of both Will and Hannibal from here on out.

Honestly, I didn't expect this fic to ever grow the life that it did. I wanted short and snappy self-indulgent ficlets. Then I realized there was a plot, and now I have a real live fic that's depending on Will's story to drive it forward. That naturally means that Will's POV should be included, and after a quick and panicked poll on my Tumblr, that's exactly what I decided to do.

TLDR; Will's here to stay.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will arrives home and says goodbye in short accord. After they hang up, Hannibal showers and readies himself for sleep at his leisure.

Will's article is an itch at the back of his mind, a curiosity. He so keenly wants to know Will's thoughts on the murder of Andrew Caldwell, but lingers on Will's statement that he wouldn't be able to find his article.

Luckily for Hannibal, he doesn't have to look. As soon as he loads his home page, he realizes what Will meant by *normal circumstances* lending themselves to his anonymity.

His article has gone viral.

Dear Boss: Silent Communication and the Chesapeake Ripper

Let's face it: we live in an era where everything is spelled out for us. Social media reigns supreme, I'm no stranger to it. "Live by the pen" has become "live by the keyboard". Getting to a story first is everything in the world of journalism, and both pictures and your thousand words about them are what define your life. There's no denying that print just can't keep up with the instant gratification of the internet at your fingers. Everyone itches to leave their mark on the world and be recognized by their peers. For most, that involves the typical social networking sites: Facebook, Reddit, Youtube, Twitter.

That's not the case for the Chesapeake Ripper.

Nine murders in eighteen months, grouped in sounders of three—three cycles complete, and the next has just begun with victim ten. Police have hesitated to even connect the killings. There's no correlation they can find between the victims, no common traits, no cookie cutter mold. No single age, race, or class. There's no notes left behind, no explanation of what he does or why. He doesn't need one. In his mind, why explain the slaughter of animals?

The only indication that his victims were once people is the way he communicates with them—and by extension, with us. The Chesapeake Ripper's kills are rich with symbolism, a modern letter From Hell, complete with the surgical removal of organs. He is judge, jury, and executioner, but his victims are far from prostitutes—they've each done something to draw his wrath. Don't take that the wrong way: the connection between killer and victim will be minimal, and perhaps even years past. He won't be a victim's boyfriend, neighbor, or college roommate. He's smarter than that, and smarter than most. Likely attractive, established, and successful. He's able to cement trust enough to disappear victims from plain sight without anyone noticing. That takes skill and practice. It takes a certain level of finesse.

If or when the police find him, they'll probably find that he has far, far more than only ten victims.

But here's what we know about them, beginning with his most recent tableau: Dr. Andrew Caldwell.

Read More…

Hannibal is fascinated.

AbnormalAnalysis.net, reads the web address. The tagline of the Homicide section reads *Death By Design.* All created by an anonymous author and contributor, which he knows to be Will Graham.

Will's articles on the Ripper cases date back more than a year, back to Hannibal's third exposé. Will had drawn the conclusion that the murders were linked even before the police had. His detailings on the crimes are intricate, though most of the articles posted quite some time after the crimes themselves had been committed—unsurprising, since Will likely had limited access to the information. Even now, Hannibal notes, there are no photos of Caldwell's body, no scans of the autopsy report, though much of the information shared was taken verbatim from it.

He wonders how much more Will might absorb and infer if he were able to see a scene himself, rather than just the body in the aftermath.

Hannibal shuts his tablet off and plugs his phone in to charge, then sets about turning off his bedroom lights. It seems he has much to think about in relation to Will Graham, and the best path to take in regards to their… relationship.

One thing is clear beyond the shadow of a doubt: Hannibal wants him, and it seems Will is receptive to his company in return. Their fates are lashed together by the iron chain of Hannibal's true persona, and by extension, Will's obsession with it. So long as Hannibal can provide Will with informative references and distinct social advantages, he'll be free to court Will on a personal basis. He needn't know that the killer he seeks is the one seeking his favor in return.

Not immediately, anyway.

It's well after two by the time Hannibal climbs between perfectly-made sheets, and as he schools his mind into a state of peace, there is a sudden bright light and disruptive noise. There is only one person who would text him so late at night, and he should most certainly be asleep by now.

Alas, it seems he's not. Yet, Hannibal can't say he's displeased.

>> I’m sure you’ve seen it by now. What’s your verdict, Doctor?

Hannibal squints at the blinding screen in the dark as he taps out his reply.

<< A thorough analysis that has great merit. I see it’s gone viral.

>> Everyone’s calling him the Chesapeake Ripper now. Too bad I didn’t trademark it.

Hannibal blinks slowly as the concept of being a *trademark* sinks into his mind. He frowns as he considers his reply, but Will gets there first.

>> What do you think the chances are that he’ll see that article?

Hannibal’s brows creep slowly up his forehead. Does Will *hope* he’ll see it, or does he dread it?

<< Very likely, I’d think, given that the crime is so recent and the response has been so large. If he has any online presence at all, he’ll probably run into it.

<< Are you concerned for your safety, Will? You yourself assured your anonymity was well-protected.

>> No, I’m not worried.

Hannibal stares at the message, even as the blinking gray bubble shows that Will is still typing. Will is either quite reasonable or quite insane, and Hannibal is not yet sure which.

>> Part of me wants him to see it. The other part of me thinks I’m crazy and have a death wish, but it kind of sounds like my dad’s voice.

>> Maybe I am crazy. Either way, I should let you sleep.

>> Thank you for talking to me on my way home tonight.

Hannibal hums and turns onto his side, phone in hand. Technology was not nearly so prevalent in his school days. He wonders if it’s so common for students to stay up at all hours for such conversations, but decides that even if it is, the conversations he has with Will are worth the restless night.

<< It was my pleasure, Will. Get some rest.

>> Thanks, you too.

Hannibal no sooner sets his phone down than it buzzes again.

>> Are you free tomorrow?

He smiles.

<< Yes. What do you have in mind?

There’s a certain sense of doom that comes with realizing yesterday was not a fever dream.

Will lies in bed for much longer than he should, Winston crushing the breath from his ribcage. It doesn't make the text log or call history on his phone any less real as he holds it high above his face.

Hannibal Lecter. *Doctor* Hannibal Lecter. The man who had, in essence, saved him from being arrested nearly a month ago for the very serious crime of *possession of false identification* and *self defense while gender nonconforming,* the latter being the primary problem with the former.

Will had thought him something of a fever dream back then, too—attractive and compassionate, who didn't ask Will invasive questions about his mental health to invalidate his gender identity. It was too much to ask for in most people, but in doctors especially.

But then Will had gone home with fractured pride and a fractured hand, and life had gone on.

Until now.

Will never expected to see Hannibal Lecter again, and now he's… he's…

"Winston," Will groans softly. "Get down."

Winston does as asked; he's always been a good listener, whether for Will or his father before him. It's the product of good training. Dogs are simple like that.

He gets down and Will gets up, tugs at the hem of his oversized sleep shirt, drags on the first pair of pants he sees (which happen to be fleece-lined leggings) and pulls his father's jacket over the top of it all. Will trudges to the entryway, crams his feet into his steel-toed boots without bothering to look for socks, and opens the door.

Winston bolts into the light of the morning. Will, somewhat less gracefully, squints at the sunlight. With the weight of his keys in his pocket, follows Winston down the steps.

The brisk morning air is sobering, enlightening, wakeful. It helps draw Will from the cacophony of his dreams, and back into the strange reality in which Will has agreed to enter a sham of a relationship with a stranger—a *source.*

It goes against every bit of ethics he's learned. And yet… it's hardly the craziest thing he's ever heard, at least in theory. In practice, it feels pretty damn crazy.

Will finger-combs through the tangle of his hair, straightens the wild fall of his bangs. Winston zooms around the main yard but doesn't go beyond the boundary of tall, dead grass—predictable as always.

Will thought he was predictable too, until yesterday.

He's managed to surprise himself.

Will leans against the porch and tips his head back to feel the sun. It is, by all rights, a beautiful morning. He wishes he hadn't stayed out so late, but that's the nature of the beast when it comes to journalism. He wonders what he'll be walking into later when he gets to the news bubble in Knight Hall—how quickly Freddie will find him and confront him about the article. Will wonders what he'll say to deter her, if he can make her back off at all.

He wonders if he'll feel better or worse when he sees Hannibal again.

Will exhales slowly in a cloud of steam.

Hannibal.

Will is the first to admit that he's probably lost his mind. But if Hannibal really means to introduce him to the higher-ups at the hospital, ferry him around from function to function, and only seek Will's company in return, then what choice does he have? He's right, after all—he has exactly the kind of connections that Will needs to survive in his chosen career path. And if a doctor feeling a midlife crisis wants to indulge Will's interests in exchange for being arm candy and late-night conversation, well—Will's certainly done dumber things.

Not in a while, though. Which makes this choice feel especially foolish.

Will whistles through his teeth, and Winston comes running. With a click of his tongue, the dog heads back inside the house, and Will returns to face the day.

Will hangs the coat on a hook by the door, kicks his work boots off in a graceless clatter. There's a table for his fly-fishing gear on one side. On the other, there's an armchair and a bookcase, and a vanity tucked into the far corner with a backlit makeup mirror. Will passes all that and heads for the kitchen, sets out a generous scoop of dog food and a fresh bowl of water, then continues on to the bathroom.

First things first. Will tips his head over and gathers his hair at his crown, pulling it back into a careless bun. There's a mess of assorted bobby pins on the sink; he scoops two up and holds them loosely between his teeth, he gathers his bangs and twirls the curls together around one finger. He clips them down and back, pins crossed over one another in an X-shape.

Will stares into the mirror and sees someone else's mind sit behind the barricade of his eyes, the faces of others he'd seen inside and echoed yesterday. Some unintentionally… and some intentionally.

Andrew Caldwell.

It's dangerous for Will to do what he does. When he allows himself to slip inside someone else's thoughts, he'll always run the risk of getting swept away. He makes sense of his madness in light and color, can pull images from air, from light, from breath. He can stand in a place and paint it as it once was, but it comes and goes without form.

Mirror neurons, they told him. Too many mirror neurons. Will is a mirror, and what he sees, he reflects back—good or bad or anything in between.

William Graham's identity is flexible, changing and multidirectional like the sea.

Wilhelmina is his port in a storm.

She lives inside his ribcage, proud and dignified. She is a solid identity. A protector. When the pieces of Will are floating downstream, she is his safety net. Maybe she's not quite him, but neither is she someone else. She allows him to define his own lines and color them in, sculpting himself from pigment and powder. She's familiar. Family. Catlike and crafty, a stretching subset of his thoughts that have tied themselves to an identity for Will to assume. She is an anchor when he is drifting that ties Will to his sense of self.

She is a tailor-made suit of armor, a first line of defense for a person who sees too much. A built-in bodyguard.

And when they are together, they become one solid silhouette named Will.

Will licks his lips, takes a breath, and gets to work.

He showered last night, so there's only this morning to attend to. He shaves the faint shadow from his face and neck first and foremost. There's not much of it to speak of, but each step of Will's routine cements a part of him in place. After shaving comes soap and warm water, which is a hell of a thing to manage with his cast. He washes the sleep from his eyes and lets his nightmares seep down the drain. By the time Will blots his face dry, he feels almost human.

Cotton pad and toner next—foundation is hell on his pores, and only careful maintenance can save Will's complexion from the unforgiving cameras of the university news station. Antiperspirant is a must, and glides onto the smooth, shaven skin of his underarms. Hypoallergenic face moisturizer follows. Will exfoliates his lips, then brushes his teeth with his electric toothbrush while the lotion dries. He turns off the water and retreats to his living room. He has the routine down to a science.

He adjusts his gait as he walks down the hallway, takes a breath and centers himself. By the time Winston wanders out of the kitchen in search of him, Will's movements are carefully controlled, his steps measured and even. He feels taller, more purposeful. Graceful. Like temperance.

He strips, and his clothes make a pile on his mattress. Will scoops up the remaining clothes on the floor that didn't bother him yesterday, deposits them all in the hamper, then straightens the blankets on the bed. This is his method of thinking, his sense of focus. Will selects his outfit for the day from his closet and lays it out: woolen socks, black denim, his favorite blouse—both feminine and alluring in royal blue, a low ruffled neckline and wide-cut sleeves. His fingers skim a soft, satiny pair of boyshort-style panties and he takes those; upon second thought, takes the matching bralette, too. He may as well, and the texture of the fabric is pleasing on his skin.

Then Will remembers they're filming a new UMTV segment today—he grimaces and doubles back. He prefers being comfortable, but professionalism is a must…

Will hums in conflicted consideration, then extracts his backup outfit. What the hell, right? He can pack it to go and change at school. It's better than being uncomfortable all day, and he's not making two trips.

Will gets dressed slowly and adjusts his sleeve over the top of his cast, then heads toward the vanity; he slips onto the worn thrift-store bench and turns on the backlit mirror, and with no time to waste, starts his process.

Primer all over, applied with his fingertips. Concealer beneath his eyes, green-tinted color correcting creme where his cheeks and throat are red from shaving—Will blends them in and evens their tone with a makeup sponge. Then comes liquid foundation, set with a large, flat brush over his full face and down his neck, blended until there's no perceptible difference in color. Foundation had been a bitch and a half to find for his cool-toned fair complexion. Expert recommendations had made all the difference.

Cream contour: dark lines to define his cheekbones and nostrils, to make his face look rounder around the edges. Highlight across the bridge of his nose, the apples of his cheeks, between his brows, beneath his chin to soften the shape. He blends each section carefully, making sure the contrast looks like natural light and shadow. It's a delicate process—but then again, he had a good teacher.

His blush is in stick form, peach with gold undertones, and Will places careful dabs between the contour and highlight of his cheekbones, swept upward toward his temples with an angled brush. Matte translucent powder sets everything in place; Will sets the compact aside to take with him, since he'll need it prior to filming.

Brows next. Will regularly keeps them shaped, but he fills in a few lighter spots with a pencil and scrubs the color through, then sets them with clear gel. He collects several small brushes and a palette and places his eyeshadow, light shimmer at the inner corners, highlight below his newly-defined brows, and a matte nude gradient that fades to a soft brown at the outer corners and offsets the blue of his eyes. Will pulls the corners of his lids ever-so-gently taut, and uncaps his liquid liner with his teeth. He traces lashline to outer edge in small, swift strokes; releases the tension, and adds a subtle wing from the natural curve of his eye. Repeating the process has taken the most practice of anything; mascara is a snap compared to the rest. Will curls his eyelashes first, then wiggles the applicator at the base to ensure volume before he pulls outward. He reapplies at the very ends to add length.

Will defines the bow of his lips with a pink pencil, then fills them in with long-stay matte liquid lipstick. He'll take that to go, as well. He pulls the bobby pins from his fringe and slides them securely onto his right front belt loop. He sighs in irritation as he fights with his bangs; curls are nearly impossible to tame when dry.

Will sifts idly through a decorative ashtray atop the vanity and extracts a pair of faux-pearl post earrings. The backs click on with a satisfying little *snap* that reminds him of the click of high heels against tile. The sound is one of power and femininity bundled together, two for one.

When Will looks up, he recognizes the person staring back. The focus dedicated to his process fades away and leaves behind a sense of peace. When Will stands, he can breathe easily. Though his identity is an ever-shifting amalgam that isn't so simply defined by a name or pronouns, he feels *right.* He feels secure. His lines are colored in.

The day is ahead of him, and he's ready for it.

Will switches off the vanity light, then smiles at the sight of Winston laying in the sun on the floor. A dog's life is really such a simple thing, he thinks as Winston's head lifts and his tail starts to wag. He's scruffy, some sort of speckled brindle mutt, but his bone structure is solid and he's athletic to a fault. Smart. Will thinks they have a lot in common. Of course, if he were a dog, he'd be fortunate to be as well cared-for as Will himself takes care of Winston.

"Hey buddy," Will murmurs fondly, then sinks to his knees to run his palms over the smooth fur of Winston's ruff. "You gonna be good while I'm gone?"

Winston's tail wags. He licks Will's hands, and Will's nose wrinkles fondly as he laughs. Winston's always had a taste for his lotion, the strange thing.

"Yeah, you're a good boy," Will says. He feels a pang of guilt as he stands, despite knowing his neighbor down the road will stop by to let him out this afternoon. It can't be fun staying all day by himself—god only knows that *living* by himself is a lonely task for Will. Maybe he should get another dog, someone to keep Winston company. "I'll be back earlier tonight, I promise."

Winston *whuffs*, and rolls onto his side. He stretches in the golden light of the winter sun as Will goes about and collects his things.

Phone, wallet, car keys, student ID. Messenger bag slung over his shoulder, complete with change of clothes, charger, and laptop; touch-up makeup and hair clips zipped safely into the front pocket.

Will shrugs on his father's old jacket, faded green and patched at the elbows, worn through where it used to rub against the docks while fishing, when he leaned back on his arms to look at the sky. The weight of heavy canvas reminds Will of a different time, of callused working hands and beers drank far too young. Of a father alone, trying to do right by a son and a daughter and neither and both at the

same time. The rusted cab of a truck. Cheap motel rooms. The scent of the ocean, whiskey, and cigarettes: all three were Beau's vices to the end.

All that's left of his life is here in Wolf Trap, Virginia, one thousand and eighty miles from home.

Will's been trying his damndest to make this place a home for himself. It's funny, though: he'd never found anything to do or met anyone in particular that couldn't be found somewhere else… until he met Hannibal Lecter.

Minus the Chesapeake Ripper, of course.

Will pauses in the doorway and pulls his phone from his pocket, then opens the string of messages from late the night before. He sends another.

> << Heading to class now. Text me when you get to campus so I can come find you! I should be done this afternoon, maybe around 1:30 or 2?

Will lets himself out the front door and locks it behind him. He shivers in the cold air and hitches his rucksack up his shoulder. His Volvo beeps as he unlocks it and sets the bag on the front seat, keys and phone set in the first and second cup holder, respectively.

Will no sooner turns over the ignition than his phone buzzes loudly, the sound of plastic-on-plastic.

> >> I'm looking forward to it. Drive safely.

Will's heart thuds in embarrassing rebellion. He's simply glad that there's no one to witness his stupidly reflexive smile.

Then he sets his phone down, and rests his face against the cold steering wheel.

He breathes. Picks it back up, and selects a different contact. Unnamed.

> << Tonight, the new place?

> >> I thought you'd never ask.

Chapter End Notes

> if you like this fic, share the word on tumblr!

1:8

Chapter Notes

> i thought i'd have this chapter out this afternoon, but instead i got to sit around for a few hours and search fruitlessly for a word i couldn't remember until i found a *way* more complicated method of describing the same sentiment. #justwriterthings

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hannibal looks up with interest at the simple, modern lines of the brick building of Knight Hall; huge windows to let in the light, framed by clean steel beams. Will had mentioned its recent construction and directions to its location in his messages the night before. Hannibal, of course, has come prepared—Will mentioned finding lunch somewhere on campus if Hannibal was willing to make the commute. And though he'd been more than willing to make the drive in favor of seeing Will's base of operations, food was the one thing he would not negotiate on, so he'd brought lunch with him.

Hannibal lingers outside the doorway, drawing the glances of passing students, their curious eyes fixing on his tailored slacks and woolen peacoat. He's a stark contrast to their winter jackets and denim jeans, but he pays them no mind. He's simply here for Will, and will wait for his guidance. Then the door swings open, and Will is there with him in the courtyard, breathless and beautiful. He shivers with the wave of cold autumn air, and there's no wonder why.

His hair is a knot of curls clipped at the crown of his head in a casual-but-pretty updo, the wisps of his bangs falling across his forehead. His blouse is royal blue, his cast partially concealed by wide-cuffed sleeves. The elegant v-shape of the neck morphs into a waterfall of ruffles that guide the eye downward and—Hannibal's brain makes a notable pause. Will's blouse is tucked into a tasteful black pencil skirt, layered over opaque nude tights and sensible black heels.

Black liner frames Will's eyes, exaggerated by the fringe of thick lashes. His cheeks burn pink, though not from powder or the cold; there's a sparse flush that reaches as low as his exposed collarbones and heaves with his quickened breath. Will's plain black lanyard and student ID rises and falls with the motion of his chest. The chilling breeze carries no hint of cherry scent—today, Will's mouth has been painted with a matte shade of dusty pink lipstick.

"I thought I said two o'clock," Will says instead of a proper greeting, though he looks alarmed enough to excuse the abruptness. He looks Hannibal over with wide eyes, and tucks a stray curl behind his ear to expose modest pearl earrings. He truly makes a stunning, classic image. "Did I not say two? Honestly, I can't remember anymore—"

The hour is only one o'clock in the afternoon; Hannibal is deliberately early. He's curious enough about Will's institution of learning that he decided to arrive slightly ahead of schedule—though admittedly, his drive progressed much more quickly than expected. He's so early it could easily be considered rude, to leave his companion unprepared for him. But he's so very glad he has.

Before Will can work himself into a frenzy from his unexpected arrival, Hannibal's hands find his waist and cheek, reeling him in for a chaste but lingering kiss. Hannibal can sense the prickling sensation of passing eyes resting heavily upon them. Excellent.

Will is the one to disengage, looking faintly dazed. His cheeks are nearly glowing, eyes cast downward, and Hannibal knows he's aware of their curious audience of nameless students. "Oh," Will murmurs. "That's revenge for yesterday, isn't it?"

"Turnabout's fair play," Hannibal replies with a smug, pleased smile. "How was your morning?"

"Eventful." Will struggles to pull his eyes from the brick walkway below their feet. Hannibal notes with some curiosity that his glasses are nowhere to be found. "We just finished recording our new segment for UMTV—I, um, meant to go change before we met up."

"Don't be shy. You look beautiful."

Will's head snaps up. There's a sharpness about him, assessing the truthfulness of Hannibal's words and the intent behind it. Hannibal wonders if Will has been conditioned to analyze every compliment he's ever received, or if he's just skeptical of Hannibal *specifically* due to their arrangement. He decides that neither is acceptable. Will's confidence should not be halted at the border of his gender identity, patrolled by his own sensibilities. Hannibal would see him competent, capable, and confident in all aspects of himself.

Apex predators do not have time for doubt.

"Alright, alright, you flatterer," Will mumbles, and sounds on a knife's edge of embarrassment and pride. Hannibal realizes that there must be people watching them that he recognizes, especially when Will draws close and nuzzles at his jaw, casually hooking his fingers into the strap of Hannibal's insulated bag and pulling it from his grip. "What'd you bring me?"

Hannibal inhales the faint scent of shea butter lotion that clings to his skin, counterpoint to the powdery smell of the shaving cream Will used that morning before applying his makeup. It's subtle, easily swept away by the wind. Will himself is, fortunately, not so easily moved. "I thought I'd bring you lunch."

Will blinks; his surprise is clear and true as he draws away, straps looped over his wrist. "Did you make it?"

Hannibal nearly laughs. How much they still have to learn about one another. "Yes, of course. We should go inside before you freeze, mylimasis."

Will's eyes flash at the unfamiliar endearment, but he thinks better of questioning it in public. He tosses his head in stubborn pride and nearly dishevels his hair. His carelessness is surprisingly charming. "I'm tougher than that."

Hannibal does smile at that, his hand slipping to Will's hip and turning him manually—it's an impatient and affectionate gesture between lovers comfortable with one another's bodies, entirely for their audience. "I have no doubt." He gives Will a nudge toward the door. "Go on. I'll follow."

Will tosses a challenging look back over his shoulder, then reaches down to tangle their fingers together. He leads Hannibal along, confident in his command over the territory within. "Wouldn't want you to get lost. We're just finishing up in the news bubble, but it might be a little while longer. I didn't expect you 'til later."

Hannibal surveys the inside of the building with interest, observing the new fixtures and high ceilings, the bright and spacious halls, and the students on clusters of couches that look up to watch them as they pass. "It seems I overestimated the commute. I expected more lunchtime traffic."

Will hums as though he doesn't believe Hannibal very much at all. "Or you wanted to see me on your terms instead of mine."

Every time Will reads him right, there's an odd pang of satisfaction at his cleverness. With anyone else, Hannibal is sure he'd be put off, perhaps threatened. Will is an outlier. "Perhaps."

"At least you brought food." Will tugs him along with purpose. "What'd you make me?"

There is a persistent sense of anticipation at the thought of Will consuming his cooking. Perverse satisfaction, anyone else would call it, if there were anyone else to know. Approval of his preparations is, perhaps, the only *true* validation Hannibal seeks in life. Outside of the medical field, Hannibal's dedication to all manners of fine cuisine is his most dedicated hobby. It would be a pleasure to have someone to share it with more regularly. "Lamb Kokkinisto and orzo, with a salad of tomato and cucumbers."

Will pauses in the threshold of a large multimedia lab and filming space, glancing down at the bag as though he might see straight through it, and then turns back to Hannibal. "Really?"

"Yes," Hannibal replies with a faint frown. "I hope that's acceptable."

Their hands are still twined. Will's fingers are chilled from the outdoors. There is no one to see them, or Hannibal would use that excuse to rub warmth back into his skin. Will doesn't even seem to notice; instead, he seems surprised. "I mean, yeah, of course, I'm just—" Will laughs, a little awkward. He touches his face, ducks his chin. "Most people I know don't know how to cook, let alone bring me lunch. It's kind of you."

Ah, so the discomfort lies in being provided for. Will is a solitary creature used to looking out for himself. It's likely that any sort of unexpected attention will always make him feel ill at ease—at least until he grows to expect it. Hannibal wonders absently if Will could perhaps be trained to anticipate care, *demand* it, to seek out Hannibal to fulfill his needs.

"I have a passion for the culinary arts," Hannibal says by way of answering. "And I'm very particular about what I put into my body. I make nearly everything I eat myself."

Will's responding expression is complicated; a little bit of a smile, a bit of a frown. "You could have just said no to lunch."

"Nonsense," Hannibal replies. He leans closer and crowds Will comfortably against the doorway, absorbing the warmth of his body and savoring the subtle dilation of his pupils. "You wanted to see me, I wanted to see you. Bringing you something was the least I could do for you, Will. I know your education keeps you busy."

"Says the emergency trauma surgeon," Will answers, a valiant attempt at sounding droll, but merely coming out breathless.

Hannibal grins in response, all teeth. "Go on. Don't let me keep you from your work. I'll wait until you're done."

Will inhales and exhales sharply, eyes bright. The heave of his chest rolls with his breath, and Hannibal's eyes rove the stunning form of Will's figure with pure aesthetic appreciation—up until the moment Will huffs a *second* time, and turns to walk away. His hand slips from Hannibal's as he goes, but Hannibal is smiling as he trails along in pursuit.

Will sets the bag on a small, unoccupied table toward the rear of the room where a silver laptop is propped open, cursor blinking expectantly on the screen. Light boxes are suspended from the ceiling, pointed at a replica newsdesk at the opposite end of the room. Students mill about on computers, comparing screens; some pore over large, industrial cameras. The temperature is quite warm from the equipment and the bodies; it's unsurprising that Hannibal finds Will's green hunting jacket draped over the back of the abandoned chair.

"I need to go check with Peter and make sure the film turned out okay. Give me a few minutes, I'll be back."

"I'm at your command," Hannibal answers with a self-satisfied smile, and sits at Will's vacated seat.

Will shoots him a complicated frown, then tugs his lanyard and student ID over his head. He presses it into Hannibal's hands. "Here, hold on to this. If anyone gives you a hard time, just mention you're visiting me. You can use my laptop if you want, just don't mess with any of the open tabs or I'll have to go digging for them."

Hannibal puts the lanyard around his neck, then sets about unbuttoning his coat and making himself comfortable. "I'll be quite alright, Will."

When Will doesn't immediately depart, Hannibal looks over and finds Will staring. He glances down at himself—white shirt, slate waistcoat to match his slacks, and he'd made the executive decision to forego the tie lest he look too formal, replaced by a few undone buttons at the collar—then back up at Will.

"You are…" Will trails off into silence. His jaw twitches, and he averts his eyes. "Not wearing scrubs."

Is that what this is about? Amusement and pride wells in Hannibal's chest at rendering his sharp-tongued companion to such a state. He unbuttons his cuffs and carefully rolls them up around his forearms; for one lovely, suspended second, Will's eyes close and he sighs as though pained.

"I prefer to wear real clothing outside of the hospital," Hannibal replies, politely pretending not to notice Will's unsubtle crisis. It seems they've established an equivalent exchange when it comes to being well-dressed, and it's satisfying to know that Hannibal is not the only one between them capable of appreciating aesthetics.

Hannibal looks up and catches the sight of a nervous-looking boy several feet off, standing patiently and expectantly while he waits for Will. He immediately averts his eyes when Hannibal notices him, shoulders tensing up around his ears and disheveled hair. He has truly deplorable posture. "It seems someone is trying to get your attention."

"Hm?" Will is distracted, but relaxes abruptly when he notices the student who waits for him. Hannibal catches the sight of an easy smile blooming across Will's face, and feels a momentary wave of something unnamed and unpleasant. "Oh, Peter! Sorry to keep you waiting."

Will walks purposefully and professionally despite his high heels; he must be used to wearing them. The realization is… enlightening. Hannibal admires the figure Will makes as he follows Peter back toward one of the industrial cameras, surveying the footage taken before Hannibal arrived. Will lingers just behind the break in the studio lighting; like Hannibal, he is cast in its shadow.

He wonders at how vibrant Will might look at the moment he steps into focus. Bright. Radiant. A shining, illuminated avatar of divinity.

And then someone sits down across from him.

He's not sure what he expects—some curious friend of Will's, perhaps, or a staff member inquiring as to his business here. What he gets is a petite young woman with angular features, pursed lips, and pale blue eyes. Between her focused demeanor and her mane of red ringlet curls, her overall appearance is decidedly vulpine.

"Haven't seen you around before," she says with a bright smile. She inclines her head toward Will. "Family?"

Hannibal follows her gaze, its sharp attentiveness, and realizes quickly that the woman may perhaps not be Will's friend at all. The saccharine-sweetness of her tone strikes him as artificial.

It's an expert rendition of friendly interest, he'll admit. But there's shrewd calculation in her face, and Hannibal is a master of seeing through false pretenses. From what rapidfire information his mind gleans, he pieces together a conclusion—this woman is Freddie Lounds, and she has no genuine interest in Will beyond muckraking his reputation.

Hannibal matches her smile with one of his own, unfailingly polite. "Not family, no. Though I am Will's guest on campus."

"Any questions I can answer for you while Will's busy?" She leans forward, elbows on the table, and rests her chin upon them. The gesture gives a rather generous view of her bosom if one cares enough to look.

Hannibal does not. Instead, he notes her careful avoidance of Will's pronouns, and raises a brow of his own. If she intends to test his mettle, Hannibal will let her think she's won. Overconfidence is often the most revealing tell in any opponent's strategy.

He levels her with his most charming smile, and sits more upright; he angles his body toward hers in a subtle mimic. "Plenty, I'm sure." He holds out his hand to her. "Doctor Hannibal Lecter."

Freddie's eyes flash with both interest and flickering fury; she's young yet, and has not yet learned to hide her emotions. She's clearly smart—she immediately pieces together the importance of his title with her suspicions regarding Will's authorship of the Ripper article. If Hannibal didn't know how much it would infuriate them both, he might compare her to Will.

"Freddie," she says, and her eyes crinkle in a way that is well-practiced at appearing harmless. Her handshake is brisk, firm; she is lacking nothing in her picture-perfect overture of welcome. If Hannibal were a less intelligent man, he might not pick up on her friendly tone masking her swift sidestep of her surname.

"So, Freddie," Hannibal continues without any particular weight, any indication that her name means anything to him, "How long have you attended the University of Maryland?"

"Three years," she replies easily. "I transferred in after my freshman year."

No mention of where she transferred from. Interesting. From the stylish cut of her clothing that speaks of careful wardrobe curation, Hannibal would guess a community college. No one tries so desperately to fit in as someone who knows the sense of being excluded. "And how long have you known Will?"

Her grin flickers, but holds firm. "We met after Will transferred here two years ago. We're both journalism majors, so we have almost all our classes together." Freddie alludes to a friendship that

Hannibal knows does not exist. She's still avoiding Will's pronouns—fishing for Hannibal's interpretation of Will's gender before she submits her own. She tilts her head to the side and makes her countermove. "How'd *you* meet Will?"

Hannibal's smile widens. That, at least, he has a good answer for. "Emergency room. Will was brought to me with a broken hand that I treated and set to rights."

He searches out Will without being fully conscious of doing so, an automatic homing beacon that seems to have set itself in his mind. Will leans over Peter's shoulder at one of the desktop stations, pointing at something obscured on the screen. If it weren't for the fact that he's consumed in his work, Hannibal might suspect him of engineering the way his skirt creeps up the backs of his thighs and stretches over the shapely curve of his ass.

"We got along quite well," Hannibal adds, and the corners of his lips twitch, his eyes linger and slip up the concave slope of Will's spine, follows the trickle of a loose curl down the nape of his neck. "Intellectually compatible."

Will straightens as though he feels the weight of Hannibal's eyes as a physical touch. For a moment, he's still and silent with his back to Hannibal and one ear tipped to the air, a wolf listening for the howl of his pack…

"Oh?" Freddie asks. "What hospital?"

...or the growl of an enemy.

There is murder in Will's eyes and a lover's smile on his lips as he summons himself to Hannibal's side. Freddie eyes Will with cruel contemplation, but even she hesitates at the ease with which Will leans against Hannibal's seated form, slips one hand into Hannibal's hair and tenderly cradles the back of his neck. It's so intimate and possessive a gesture that Hannibal is momentarily captivated by the sensational scritch of nails against his scalp.

"I see you've met Freddie," Will says with every tonal indication that this is uneventful but pleasing news. Even outside the scope of Freddie's narrowed eyes, Will's thumb massages sensual circles at the base of Hannibal's skull.

Two can play at Will's little game, and Hannibal is as experienced at playing clueless as he is at being clever. "Yes, we were just talking about you."

Will's smile is frozen, chilling. Freddie's beaming grin is a porcelain mask. "Thank you for keeping him company, Freddie, but I think I'm done now."

Freddie leans back in her chair, every muscle in her body held stiff. She is a predator backing away, but not backing down. "Shame, and I thought we were getting along so well," she says, and her eyes fall to Hannibal. Her voice is smug with satisfaction. She pronounces every syllable when she purrs, "Intellectually compatible."

It's a shame for *her* that Will is a stunning actor, and Hannibal is always willing to indulge his scenes.

Will laughs, soft and clear as a bell. He bends at the waist to nuzzle the top of Hannibal's head; Hannibal slips his arm comfortably and possessively around Will's waist. It is a display any encroaching prospect would wisely heed: a statement shared by a mated pair that says *I am his and he is mine.*

“You’re in high demand, Hannibal,” Will says, and smooths back Hannibal’s bangs to press a kiss to his forehead. His lipstick is flawless—it leaves no trace behind, but for the burning impression Hannibal feels on his skin.

“Perhaps fortunately for Miss Lounds, my attention belongs solely to you,” Hannibal replies warmly. It’s a two-for-one shot, and Freddie’s lips thin with displeasure. Hannibal offers her a polite nod. “I won’t take up any more of your time. Enjoy your day, Freddie.”

Will radiates vindicated pleasure enough to shield Hannibal from the bitter chill of Freddie’s curt sneer.

“You too, *Doctor* Lecter,” she says sweetly. It’s a reminder—she’s not forgotten the clues she thinks she’s found. “I’m sure we’ll be seeing each other again.”

“I’m sure we will.” He dismisses her and looks up, sees Will backlit by studio light—beautiful benediction that he is. Will tenderly straightens Hannibal’s hair with his fingertips, the backs of his knuckles ghosting over Hannibal’s cheek. He finds Hannibal’s palm at his waist and takes it in his other, mindful of the cast in the way, and spins out slowly with the grace of a dancer.

Hannibal rises to his feet and draws Will’s broken hand to his chest. His eyes are only for Will as he brushes his lips over rough, plain plaster. “Shall we have lunch? I trust you won’t let me pull you prematurely from your work.”

“Not prematurely, no,” Will replies with sweet indulgence, and only pulls his hand from Hannibal’s in favor of gathering his belongings. “But I think I can get away with some self-care time.”

Will closes his laptop and slides it into his messenger bag; Hannibal shrugs on his coat. Freddie rises and slinks away with frequent backwards glances, though whatever emotion she is feeling is of no concern to them. Hannibal smirks and places his hand at Will’s lower back, pitches his voice to be intimate but audible. “I believe your care is *my* responsibility and privilege, if I’m not mistaken.”

“Sometimes,” Will says with a coy glance over his shoulder. “When I decide you’ve earned it.”

“Have I earned you yet today?”

Will zips his bag closed; Hannibal reaches over before Will can stop him and lifts it onto his own shoulder, then slips the straps of the tote containing their lunch over his forearm. Will visibly wars with himself and considers arguing. He’s unsettled by Hannibal taking care of him in this way, but their audience demands a gracious and thankful lover, and so Will has been put in check. Will’s brow crinkles at the realization before he smoothes it over. It’s a victory for Hannibal, albeit one that only he and Will can understand and enjoy.

His victory is cinched when Hannibal gathers Will’s jacket and holds it up, and Will is politely blackmailed into letting Hannibal help him put it on. He’s discomfited, but Hannibal is nothing short of satisfied.

“I think I’ll let the food decide,” Will says. He turns, their bodies close together, and is conscious of their curious audience when he reaches out to snag Hannibal by the lanyard. He lingers close, head tilted, eyes fixated on Hannibal’s lips—

Will pulls the lanyard gracelessly over Hannibal’s head and walks away. Hannibal stares after him before he is forced to follow.

“If that’s the case, then I’ll have faith in my chances,” Hannibal replies.

Will turns, walking backward out the doorway, forced to take small steps due to the restrictive nature of his pencil skirt and high heels. They’ll have to stop somewhere for Will to change at some point (since he’s sure Will has a change of clothing), but until he bends his neck to ask, Hannibal will carry on. His brows raise, and he plays his false sense of comfort well. “You’re that confident in your cooking skills?”

“Yes,” Hannibal says. They return to the hallway, bright with afternoon sun—two well-dressed and out-of-place people among the throng of coeds, sweatpants and tee shirts, faded denim and thrift store winter jackets. Freddie is well out of earshot, but they have enough witnesses for Hannibal to know he can get away with it when he says, “And in my ability to please you, my dear.”

Will pauses, allowing Hannibal to properly catch up before they set off side by side. He shoots Hannibal a sidelong look, coolly unruffled despite the boldness of Hannibal’s suggestive implication. “That remains to be seen.”

“All appetites at some point demand to be sated.”

Will’s eyes flash. There is the threat of danger in his aura, and the vibrations of Will’s irritated instincts in the atmosphere are addictive. Hannibal could happily find himself in trouble if he continues to indulge without temperance.

Hannibal lifts the lunch bag, a deflection and a ceasefire—for now. “Shall we sate yours?”

Will tucks his hands in his pockets, and the curl of his lip exposes the very points of his canines. “Yes, perhaps we should. I *am* getting pretty hungry. It would be a terrible shame if you were to tease me for too long and I decided to sink my teeth into you, instead.”

It’s meant as a tease; an offhand threat from an irritated, lovely thing with his patience pushed too far.

It still sends a shock through Hannibal’s blood.

“So long as you didn’t waste me, I believe my soul would find peace with that fate,” Hannibal replies. There is a pressure in his chest that he cannot dispel.

It’s want. Terrible, terrible want.

Will hums, aloof. Curls fall from his updo in the aftermath, catching in the folds of his collar. His eyes are fixed ahead, off Hannibal entirely. “Do you believe in the soul?”

He is, perhaps, more beautiful now than he has ever been. “As wholeheartedly as I believe in you, Will, and all that you are capable of.”

Will huffs, a singular wry laugh. “My biggest fan.”

Hannibal thinks of blood, of bone, of words on a screen and secrets printed in pixels. He thinks of being seen, and the gleam of steel; a morgue’s slab, the cold shine of a blade—the museum halls from which his art is appreciated. Will is, first and foremost, the premiere curator of Hannibal’s masterpieces.

But the greatest complement as an artist is to inspire another’s work. Hannibal is most keenly interested in attending an exhibition of Will’s own making, watching the reverent eyes of the student become the steady hands of a master.

Hannibal had never seen the benefit of a legacy or a partner until *he* was seen by Will.

“Yes,” Hannibal says, and he smiles. “I believe I am.”

They reach the atrium, and with classes still in session, it’s not terribly crowded. They find seats at the window bar and set down their belongings, and Hannibal pulls out Will’s chair. Will nods his thanks in a regal incline of his head. He doesn’t fuss. He’s already learning, already allowing Hannibal to mold and change his shape.

Hannibal unzips the insulated carrier and sets two sealed tupperware containers before each of them, utensils and napkins beside. He’s come prepared. The stew is still warm and the orzo fragrant; watching Will absorb the mingled scents when he removes the lid is an exercise in restraint.

Hannibal waits, watches with rapt fascination while Will takes the first cautious bite.

His lashes flutter as he closes his eyes. He savors. Hannibal immediately likes Will better for it, that he takes the time to roll the flavors over his clever tongue before he chews and swallows.

When his eyes open, he seeks out Hannibal with a wry twist of his lips. He looks conciliatory and challenging in equal measures, and Hannibal can tell he is biting the inside of his cheek to keep himself from smiling.

Hannibal raises one brow in expectant relish; Will looks very much like he’d like to hit him for it.

And yet again, Will surprises him. He demurely crosses his ankles as he leans over, draws Hannibal in with soft fingers along his jaw to offer a chaste, appreciative peck. Then he goes back to eating like nothing at all has happened.

“It’s delicious,” Will says, and pointedly doesn’t meet his eyes. “Thank you.”

The food *has* decided things. In this moment, without anyone of importance watching them, Hannibal has earned Will’s approval. It’s gratifying. Complicated.

Hannibal takes a slow, silent breath, and removes the lid of the kokkinisto. Underneath the bar, he feels the smooth toe of a high heel brush against his calf. He turns his head to look at Will; in profile, his vibrant eyes are concealed by the wisps of his bangs, but his cheeks glow with warmth.

That’s two things Andrew Caldwell has been good for. It’s two more than he’d ever contributed in life.

Hannibal hides his smile and takes a bite. “My pleasure.”

Chapter End Notes

Sketch Commission of Will by @simrell. Reblog it here.

if you like this fic, you can share it on tumblr!

1:9

Chapter Notes

> i definitely meant this chapter to include the entire next scene but, as usual, will and hannibal wouldn't stop talking and i wanna keep these chapters fairly short. RIP, this fic is gonna be like fuckin 200k before it's done. goddamn it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It seems no sooner than Hannibal arrives that Will is seeing him off.

There's a bittersweet pleasure in being back to his normal self, sleek pumps replaced by chunky heeled boots, skirt tucked away into his bag, updo dismantled and replaced by a sloppy, perfunctory bun. Yet, Hannibal's eyes seem to linger just as much as they had before.

College Park is a big campus. For every student Will knows, there's ten he doesn't. As he wanders toward the visitor parking lot tucked under Hannibal's arm, he wonders what they look like to people who don't know them. Does the age difference make it seem sordid? Do they look happy together? How many people see heels and skinny jeans, long hair and makeup, all of it at a distance and think that Will is Hannibal's girlfriend, not his…

Well, he's not really Hannibal's *anything.* But it would be far too easy to get used to this.

Homemade food, casual touch, a sharp mind to spar with—Will languishes in Hannibal's attention and walks the tightrope of his want. There's only so much he can give under the guise of their arrangement. Anything more feels… greedy.

Hannibal wants to study him, Will reminds himself. Study him in exchange for access, connections, and confidential information. Their flirting is a means to an end, a reputation shared and built for the eyes of all around them.

There's no need to touch Hannibal in private. Of course, neither is there any need to *see* Hannibal in private. Outside the realm of meeting each other in public places, somewhere between Will's school and Hannibal's hospital and a few rendezvous points in between, they'll never have reason to spend time together one-on-one outside of information exchanges.

The thought leaves Will strangely lonely. Perhaps he and the Ripper have that in common: pursuit of their goals at the cost of all else, including companionship. If he gets attached, gets used to this war of wills and trials of affection, it'll only making losing Hannibal more painful when their arrangement comes to an end.

"You're thinking quite loudly," Hannibal says as they cross from the sidewalk to the pavement. His arm is a strange and comfortable weight around Will's shoulders; the lunch bag is nestled on Hannibal's other hip, looped over his forearm. Will's not even sure how he came to be in this position. He only knows that it makes his heart race, but he feels settled. Safe. "Would you like to talk about it?"

Will bites back a growl and a sharp retort about being psychoanalyzed *again.* He exhales through his nose. If Hannibal wants to psychoanalyze him… well. That's why this whole thing started, right? "I'm just irritated about Freddie," he lies.

It's not *entirely* a lie. But it's just enough of one.

Hannibal hums in response. If he senses Will's dishonesty, he doesn't indicate it. "Her interest will pass. For now, she sees me as a gateway to incriminating information about you. You needn't worry—the novelty is temporary, and her perception of our relations will grow boring."

"I'm not worried," Will replies. "I'm angry. You could be anyone and she'd still stick her nose into this. She just won't leave me alone."

Hannibal's hand curls around Will's bicep. His fingers flex, and for a moment, it almost hurts. "Do you believe she seeks to influence you personally or professionally?"

"For her, it's one in the same." Will sighs in irritation. "I wouldn't be surprised if she tried to hunt you down."

Hannibal makes a noise of interest. "That seems excessive for a college rivalry."

"Well, that's Freddie," Will grumbles. Yes, he'll have to take precautions. Starting with a backup phone line. Maybe a new device from which to post his articles and secure his research. Encrypted notes. "There's still time to back out if you don't want this following you into your professional life, you know."

The words sting, but Will knows he means them as soon as he says them. Perhaps it would be the kinder thing to do—for Will to struggle on alone without pulling Hannibal into his world.

"I welcomed you into my professional life, if you'll recall," Hannibal replies pointedly. "I don't have an unrealistic expectation of what that might entail."

"It's nearly impossible to expect the things that follow me around," Will replies darkly. "I just want to warn you ahead of time so you can't say I didn't try."

Hannibal stops in the middle of the parking lot; Will stumbles ahead, then turns back to face him. His expression is unreadable, up until the moment he steps forward and grasps Will by the shoulders.

"Whatever unpleasantries haunt your steps, you don't have to face them alone," Hannibal says seriously. He surveys Will's face with singular, rapt attention.

Will averts his eyes and focuses intensely on Hannibal's cheek. Hannibal may not be a licensed psychiatrist yet, but he's still one of the most perceptive people Will's ever met in his life. He doesn't want to know what personal truths may be unearthed through eye contact. "That's not your responsibility."

Hannibal's gaze intensifies. "Is it not?"

"No," Will says, and swallows hard. There's panic in his chest, and he takes a breath. He lets it out in a shudder. This is uncomfortable. He doesn't like it. He's being boxed in, and like a feral, nervous dog, he's feeling pressured to bite by the instincts rattling around his skull. "I'm an adult, I can handle myself."

“Everyone needs a support system, no matter their age. For the foreseeable future, I am yours and you are mine.” There’s such possession in those words that it feels like a collar, thick enough around his throat that Will feels every swallow like a tug on his chain. He wants to run, to plunge directly into the frigid stream behind his house and never emerge, so long as he drowns while untethered. They’re not committed, Will is not *owned,* so why does it feel like he is? “You said yourself that there’s not much difference between pretending to be in a relationship and the reality of being in one. If I’m to confide in you, Will, you may also confide in me.”

Will’s heart kicks up to double-time, but he’s sure he manages to conceal it well—other than the heat he can feel in his cheeks and spreading down his chest, a visible flush disappearing under the collar of his coat. Damn it. “That’s not your responsibility, either.”

Hannibal’s hands draw together, creeping steadily across Will’s shoulders with enough pressure that Will wonders if he’s about to be strangled. When Will glances up, he is stricken still and silent—the light catches Hannibal’s eyes, and they glow red like coals, like hellfire. He is beautiful, and for a second, he is truly terrifying.

Will cannot look away.

“I want to help you, you stubborn thing,” Hannibal growls. “If something threatens you, Will, it threatens me, too. We were seen together in the morgue hours before your article was posted. Like it or not, we are in this together. You think I’ll spill all if your classmate happens to track me down? Incriminate you to save myself?”

“It’s what you would do if you were smart,” Will murmurs. He tears his eyes away, and focuses on the embossed buttons of Hannibal’s coat. It’s fine wool, dyed a rich navy blue. If it weren’t for Will’s hunter-green coat interrupting blue and shades of gray, they two would nearly match.

He likes that idea more than he should.

He’s getting attached.

Fuck.

Hannibal’s hands reach either side of Will’s throat. Will closes his eyes. What would it be like if Hannibal snapped his neck right now? Put Will out of his misery, his aching loneliness, his troubled mind, his graying morals?

No, he thinks as he feels a thumb stroke gently over his earlobe, the faux pearl earring. No. Hannibal wouldn’t do that to him.

Hannibal cradles his jaw, and Will opens his eyes. “Then mark me as a fool,” Hannibal says with his unreadable face, “because I have no intention of turning you away for my own gain. Our choices will determine whether we rise or fall, but Fate has brought us together.”

Will swallows. Hannibal’s pupils dilate at the feel of it.

“Then Fate’s a transphobic sonuvabitch,” Will replies softly. “And a frat boy.” And despite being deliberately glib, Hannibal looks truly amused. Honestly fond, and honestly *annoyed* when Will adds, “We’re gonna get hit by a car if we don’t move pretty soon, you know.”

Will grins. The tension breaks. There is something vulnerable inside him that is peering through the cracks in his shell and likes what it sees, and it may very well be the person Will is when he first

wakes up in the morning. The person he is before he puts on his armor, becomes someone who can keep up with Hannibal. That person is the one who takes Hannibal's hands away from his face, but kisses the backs of Hannibal's knuckles before he pulls him along.

Yes, like Hannibal said, turnabout's fair play. And Will is only getting started.

Hannibal takes the lead while respecting the limits of their tangled hands, searching out his vehicle and bringing Will along for the adventure. The commuter's lot isn't far from here; once Hannibal departs, Will has errands to run before the rest of his evening takes shape. It promises to be an interesting one.

"I had meant to ask you," Hannibal segues, "there's an upcoming benefit gala for the Baltimore Symphonic Orchestra in a few weeks, shortly before Thanksgiving. I was hoping you might accompany me—as my guest, of course."

Will raises a brow and shoots Hannibal a sidelong look. "Is that you asking or telling?"

Hannibal's lips thin with momentary irritation, and against his better judgement, Will feels a flicker of satisfaction. If Hannibal's so insistent on keeping him around, he should be privy to *all* Will's quirks. Then his face smooths over; after a second of silence, he almost looks amused. "Where are my manners? Yes, Will—would you do me the honor of attending as my plus-one?"

Will hums in approval. "Much better." With a fizzle of warmth and anxiety muddling together in his belly, he replies, "Yes, Doctor Lecter, I'd like that. You'll have to send me the information."

"I will trade it for a copy of your class schedule," Hannibal replies with a warm twist of his lips.

"Which I'll trade for a copy of your shift schedule." Will shrugs casually. "Then neither of us will have any reason to surprise one another but our own intent."

Hannibal seems to like that answer; a strange and curious smile plays about his mouth for a handful of seconds. "Indeed."

Will flexes his fingers within his cast. "I hope your black tie event accepts unconventional accessories."

Hannibal frowns, then catches on to Will's meaning. He huffs in amusement as he lifts his head, attentive—they must be getting close to his car by now. "You've been in the cast for three weeks; I believe it's high time to transition you to a splint. If you'd like to stop by the hospital tomorrow evening, I should be able to remove it for you."

Fierce anticipation is Will's immediate reaction. "Yeah. Definitely, yes. I hate this thing."

"It's decided, then," Hannibal replies. He makes a sound of recognition, and there's a flash of keys in his free hand. "Ah, here we are."

Will stares at the sleek black vehicle, its immaculate chrome grill, the classically square silhouette. Even in the height of road salt season, it's perfectly detailed. His lips part in awed apprehension. "I'm hesitant to admit that I don't know what kind of car this is."

"That's not terribly surprising, since it's not an American-made vehicle. It's is a Bentley Arnage. European." Hannibal unlocks the car and reaches in to put the lunch bag into the passenger side footwell.

“This thing’s a tank,” Will says. He paces around it, wide-eyed. “Jesus. No expense spared, huh?”

Hannibal stands, arms crossed casually on the roof of the car. He watches every move Will makes, and Will has the distinct feeling of being hunted. It’s both intimidating and exhilarating. “I prefer to think of it as an investment. Few things are still made like the classics.”

“Yeah, I guess so. This thing’s gotta have one hell of a motor.” Will’s technical side is intrigued. Of course, he would never dare lay hands on such an intricate system that’s worth more than, in Bev’s words, his entire mortal soul. He’ll stick to the boat motor and his pipe dream about taking her back out on the Atlantic, thank you very much.

“Five hundred horsepower,” Hannibal replies mildly. He must see the intrigue in Will’s eyes, because he asks with intrigue of his own, “Are you interested in mechanics?”

“I mean, enough to get by,” Will replies. He lays his good hand respectfully on the Bentley’s hood, much in the manner that one would pat a prized racehorse. He imagines that he can sense the power beneath the steel, combustion fueled by gasoline and human will. Motors are truly one of humankind’s most ingenious inventions. He strokes his fingertips lightly over the glossy paint. “I should get going, too. I have some errands to run before I can go home.”

Not precisely a lie. Half-truths seem to be the best way to escape Hannibal’s sharp-eyed scrutiny.

There is a slight furrow between Hannibal’s brows. “If I knew you planned to go, I would have walked you to *your* car, not the other way around.”

Will smiles. Offending Hannibal’s genteel sensibilities could become a dangerous pastime. “Don’t worry, I think I’ll survive the walk in broad daylight.”

He frowns at Will. “It’s the principle of the thing. It’s only polite.”

Will tilts his head to the side and offers a grin. “I think a little impropriety is good for the soul every now and again, don’t you?”

“Perhaps.” Hannibal looks slightly mollified, but rather like he suspects Will has pulled one over on him. Maybe he has. Either way, he’s definitely preparing something of his own in return when he says, “I can assist you in choosing something suitable for the gala, if you’d like.”

Will’s grin widens. It’s clearly not the reaction Hannibal expects. “I’ll get back to you.”

His eyebrows creep upward. “If you insist. Let me know sooner than later, in case we require the assistance of a tailor.”

Will drums his fingers on the Bentley’s hood and takes a few steps backward, smiling as he goes. “Oh, I’ll be sure to.” Will knows he should say a proper goodbye; perhaps gift Hannibal with a peck on the cheek to maintain appearances. He does nothing of the sort as he walks back on his heels away from the car, absorbing the mess of emotions that Hannibal tries so valiantly to hide. “I’ll see you tomorrow night, okay? I’ll text you my schedule when I get home later.”

Hannibal clearly has questions—denying him answers is Will’s only satisfaction. Hannibal’s already had too many victories over him today. Sometimes there’s pleasure in being petty.

Hannibal opens his mouth; he looks like he means to ask something, and then his jaw snaps shut. “Yes, that’ll do nicely.”

Will pauses. Denying Hannibal is all in good fun, but denying Hannibal is denying *himself,* too. He realizes all at once that he wouldn't mind a goodbye kiss—but perhaps that's even more reason not to let himself have it.

Games of propriety are truly exhausting.

"Drive safely," Will says, and hopes a softer smile conveys his genuine feeling. "I'll be out until late, probably. You know, if you feel like calling."

Hannibal's expression smoothes. It's not relief, per se—but Will is filled with a certain clarity in regards to Hannibal's clenched jaw not a minute ago. Of course he won't ask for what he wants. It's simply take first, unless it's outside the range of what seems well-mannered and polite.

"Of course, Will." Hannibal stares at him intently over the roof of the car. He doesn't blink. "Enjoy your afternoon."

Will nods, lifts his hand in farewell, and retreats.

Hannibal fades from view. Will picks his way toward the commuter lots across campus, and his phone buzzes in his pocket.

>> hey what time are we meeting again?

<< i got out early. want to meet at 4?

>> day drinking! i like it!

<< awesome i'll meet you there.

It's not until the message is sent that Will realizes he didn't bother with grammar. It feels like it *matters* when he's texting Hannibal. It's not the same with his friends.

He can think about it later. But in the meantime, he has errands to run. Will jogs to his Volvo and tosses his bag carelessly onto the passenger seat, climbs in and cranks the ignition. His car groans to life—hardly a classic or a high-class machine, but Will's been able to keep it running since his dad died, and that's really about all he can ask of it.

It's about all he can ask of *himself,* and he seems to be doing pretty well. If he can keep going, he'll count it as a success.

Will can only hope he'll reach his destination unscathed.

Hours later, in a bar across town, Will drops into his seat in a graceless slump. He meets sharp green eyes; she watches him like a hawk. The weight of her gaze is familiar, and in its own way, comforting. He knows exactly what to expect from her, and what to expect from their time together.

Will reaches across the table, and they clink glasses.

"So," she says, and her red lips spread into a sly grin, "tell me about this doctor of yours."

Will groans softly and tips his head back against the booth. His curls tumble in a wave down his back, fuzzy from a long day of exertion and work. She is his echo, his foil—perfectly posed and sleek, a flawless woman off the cover of a magazine. She is Will's teacher, his support system, and most importantly, his closest and most trusted friend.

"Margot," Will sighs emphatically, "I don't even know where to begin."

Chapter End Notes

reblog to enter a raffle for the rights to my firstborn child

1:10

Chapter Notes

> please check out the absolutely lovely fanart of will by **ethicsbecomeaesthetics**!!! Thank you *so* much!! <3 <3 <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"So you're fucking," Margot says bluntly. Her perfectly-sculpted false nails make an intimidating *taptaptaptap* on the side of her glass, even though she's smiling.

"We are *not,*" Will protests. "You literally heard everything I just said."

Margot waves her hand vaguely. "Now or later, Will, what I'm hearing is that you're hooked." She looks pleased by this. Her eyes are lit with humor, pride. "And he's hooked on you."

"*He* is not. Margot, please." She shakes her head like Will is someone young and naïve; a high school girl protesting the semantics of sex and attraction. Will is anything *but* that, but Margot has a way of reducing him to his roots.

"You found a man who wants to give you nice things, introduce you to the right people, and pay for your entry fees and your fancy outfits. And what he wants in return is to listen to you *talk.*" She speaks slowly, patiently, like Will is perhaps very stupid, or maybe very sweet. "He's a goner, Will Graham. *We're in this together?* He may as well have asked you to marry him."

Will leans forward, elbows braced on the table. His hands fold over his lower face, the bridge of his nose, and put gentle pressure at the inner corner of his eyes. "Is this some sort of rich people thing?"

"I dunno, maybe," Margot replies easily. "But I do know that entry to the Symphonic Orchestra Gala starts at more than a thousand dollars per person, but Doctor Lecter is usually a Principal Sponsor."

Will blanches at the implications.

Margot continues on carelessly, gesturing with her glass as she speaks. Her whiskey threatens to slosh over the side. Will knows she can afford the waste, but the principle of the thing would make his poor blue-collar father roll over in his grave. He really has to work with her on holding her liquor—there's nothing quite like a sloppy drunk to alert the bartenders to the fact that they're *both* too young to be here, no matter how large the bill Margot slipped the bouncer when they entered. "I mean, ten thousand is chump change to Daddy, but for a *normal* person, that's perfectly generous."

Will's jaws part in stunned horror. "Ten *thousand?"*

"Per person, of course." Margot tilts her head to the side. Her picture-perfect curls drag over the grimey table, and she doesn't seem to notice. She's a woman whose every motion is calculated and controlled, every word hand-selected, but for those times when she's with Will. They make each other safe. Will needs her guidance in this world he's chosen and terribly unprepared for; Margot desperately needs relaxation and someone who doesn't heap expectations on her shoulders. These

things usually balance each other out, except for on nights like these, when Will remembers how completely worlds-apart they truly are.

“Last year’s gala raised more than two million dollars,” she says with a shrug. She takes another long sip of her whiskey. Her cheeks are red as her lips, and there’s a smudge where her lipstick has left an imprint on the glass. Will’s has all but rubbed away with the hours of wear.

“Our symphony’s not as fancy as Boston or the New York Philharmonic, but we make due. Daddy usually sponsors as a Senior Underwriter and gets a table for the family to the cool tone of one-fifty. All the best publicity, you know.” She nods sagely, a bit sarcastically. Will knows there is no love lost between the members of the Verger family, especially between Margot and her fundamentalist Christian father.

She, like Will, is unconventional. It’s one of the reasons they get along so well.

“I’d invite you to go with us, but…” she mutters glumly into the bottom of her glass. “Well, you know.”

Will does know. Beau Graham had worked for a time maintaining the Verger’s yachts and keeping them in sporting shape, and Will along with him—up until an *incredibly* intrusive Mason Verger discovered that Will was not the poor, helpless girl he’d previously assumed.

Things got complicated after that, but much to the Vergers’ consternation, Will and Margot have remained good friends even after the Grahams had moved on. Will remains a pariah at the Verger properties—it’s why they always meet in Washington, venturing to try out new and exciting bars and restaurants when the pressures of their lives grow to be too much. Though in the summer, they are also happy to spend time at the little house in Wolf Trap.

So long as Will’s in good company, he’s not often picky of the locale. Which is why the idea of spending ten thousand dollars (per *person?*) to go anywhere is beyond unreasonable.

“I know, don’t worry about it,” Will says, and ducks his head. He sips at his whiskey and rolls the smoky taste over his tongue, the faint burn as it slides down his throat. He’s had smoother spirits, but he can’t complain about cheap and flavorful. It’s hardly the jet fuel moonshine he’d grown up on in Louisiana. “I’m still trying to get over the sticker shock.”

“It means he likes you,” Margot replies kindly. In her heart, Margot is a terribly sweet woman, made ruthless by her raising. She rarely shows the crueler side of herself to Will—he tries to make it so she doesn’t ever need to.

But in this moment, Will would prefer honesty to kindness. “Or he wants something from me.”

Margot leans back; her back hits the booth with a huff. “He can want something from you and still like you. Rich people don’t stay rich because they blow their money on frivolous stuff, Will. They stay rich because they invest in things they see as worthwhile. You don’t have to be a financial advisor to realize Doctor Lecter’s investing in your future.”

Will laughs quietly. The idea is ridiculous. But that *is* what’s happening, isn’t it? “We’re practically strangers. He doesn’t even know me. Why would he do that?”

“Every artist needs a muse.” Margot sets her glass on the table. Her eyes are shockingly sharp and clear considering the alcohol she’s consumed so far. “We’re all artists in our own right. We all need a

reason to get up in the morning, and sometimes the reason's unexpected. Maybe *you're* his unexpected."

Will takes a deep breath. He lets it out. He swallows hard, and knocks back the rest of his whiskey, then sets his glass beside Margot's. "I didn't ask for this."

Margot nods. "That's *okay,* though, Will. If you like him, let him take care of you. Let him do this, because obviously it makes him happy. But if it makes *you* unhappy…" She sighs, and purses her faded red lips. She opens her mouth—

"It doesn't," Will interrupts softly. His palms flatten on the tabletop, feeling the smooth formica slide against his skin. "I'm not unhappy. I'm just… unbalanced."

Margot softens; she reaches for his hand and comfortingly wraps her fingers around his. "You're not supposed to be balanced. It's called *falling* for a reason."

Will snorts, but obligingly turns his hand in hers. He's her shadow, her persistent follower, and it's clear to him like this—with painted nails and callused fingers, where Margot is professional manicures and hands that have only ever been roughened by the reigns of show horses. He wonders how she would define them instead.

"I'm not falling," Will replies. "Barely stumbling."

"You're flat on your ass," Margot retorts. She smiles. "Even if you don't know it yet."

"If I don't know it, it definitely doesn't count." Will huffs. He considers whether or not he wants another drink and decides against it—then considers Margot's glass, instead. "I was wondering if you could help me with something. You don't have to if you don't want to. It may get us into trouble with your father."

Margot tips her head to the side and considers him, appropriately cautious, but indulgent. "In regards to…?"

Will taps his nails on the table. "My wardrobe for the gala."

Margot smiles. She picks up her glass, turns Will's hand over, and places it in his palm. "This is my fee," she says. "Go get me another and we'll talk."

Will's lips pull at a grin. "You already have something in mind, you just want a free drink."

"Guilty," she confesses. She's a shark, a shrewd businesswoman, and if her only charge is a stiff drink, then Will counts himself lucky to be among those she favors. It's not easy for most to strike a deal with a Verger. Will is one of the few.

Will raises his brows. "Any requests?"

"No. You know what I like." Margot tilts her chin up, cheeky, and shoots him her finest smile. "And I know what you like. And when you get back, you're going to tell me what Doctor Lecter likes, and I'll try to make us all happy."

Will balks. *"I* don't even know what he likes."

Margot leans forward, elbows on the table. "We know he likes *you,*" she says. "So go get me that drink. We'll start from there."

“Doctor Lecter, come in.” She stands back, tall and dignified, and motions for him to enter.

Hannibal steps into her domain and takes in several things at once: her decor is minimalist but soothing, photographs of nature and simple objects. The walls are painted a tasteful gray-blue that borders on stereotypical. The books on the shelf, though, are first-edition—expensive, classic tomes.

Of course, Hannibal always knew she was a woman of taste. He would not be here otherwise.

“Thank you, Doctor Du Maurier,” he replies. “I promise to keep this brief. I know you’re a busy woman.”

He waits for her to shut the door and round her desk before he sits. Though Hannibal usually prefers to stay away from the hospital on his days off, this meeting is a necessary evil. He does take some comfort in that he’s not conferring with a woman of her status while wearing scrubs.

Bedelia Du Maurier is the picture of poise, perfect posture as she sits at the edge of her desk chair, leaned politely forward and engaged. Her hands are lightly crossed before her, in full view. She is unthreatening but commanding, and there is a glint in the green of her eyes that Hannibal rather likes. Like him, she is more than she seems.

“What can I do to help you today, Doctor Lecter?”

Hannibal mimics her posture. He is cautious not to take up too much space, lest he seem presumptuous and self-assured. He is confident, of course, but not overconfident. “I’ll be frank,” he says simply, and she raises a brow in response; gestures graciously for him to continue. “I find surgery to be a challenging and fulfilling path. I have no regret for how I’ve spent the last ten years between my residency and subsequent years as a trauma surgeon. However…”

He considers his words carefully. Her expression has not changed, nearly impossible to read. Against Hannibal’s better judgement, it makes him like her more. He would be glad not to suffer the next years of his life under the beck and call of a simpering fool.

“…as I age, I am considering a change. The physical demands of surgery are somewhat more grueling than I anticipated, and this career leaves little time for other pursuits. With that in mind, I have started considering my options.”

She does not buckle. Instead, she inclines her head. “I assume there is a reason you are at my door, rather than the Dean of Medicine’s office with a letter of resignation.”

He quirks his lips in response. “Quite. As the Director of Psychiatry, I thought it best to appeal to you first and foremost. I applied late last month for a residency position in your department. I know it is not my decision to make, but I hoped to discuss the matter with you.”

“Yes,” Doctor Du Maurier says with a faint smile. “I did note your application. I had wondered if and when you would reach out.” She sits back in her chair, comfortable and considering. “It may comfort you to know that I had intended to reach out next month when we interview the rest of our candidates.”

The information is pleasing, albeit not surprising. Hannibal has been a doctor of note within these walls for quite some time. However, satisfaction knows no master, and he feels it all the same. “That is a relief.”

“I’ll admit my surprise, Doctor.” If she’s surprised, she doesn’t seem it. “Though your complaints of strain and stress are valid, you could more easily convert your specialization in trauma surgery to something routine outside of the emergency room. Scheduled hours Monday through Friday, a comfortable life. With, I will admit, a much higher salary than submitting yourself to a new residency.”

Hannibal smiles politely in response. Ah, yes: money. The first and foremost worry of the average American. He is much more interested in her choice of words. “The money is of no concern to me. I have saved and invested enough to be comfortable while I, as you say, *submit myself to a new residency.* ” Her eyes flash. Good. She knows that he has picked up on her subtle test. Any psychiatrist worth their cause must be able to note latent intentions in the verbal patterns of their patients. Hannibal is more than suited to the task. “I’m simply faced with the reality that I’m no longer happy with my practice. I cannot bring myself to regret the time I’ve spent, but I have always counted myself deeply fascinated with the workings of the mind. I would like to take the opportunity to change directions with my life, and I would prefer to do so as close to home as I am able.”

The suggestion of roots is a farce. Hannibal has no care for house or home, but it is an instinct most identify with and respect. He has no family here, just a superfluous circle of associates. There are only two things tying him to the Baltimore area now—his outstanding and infernal reputations, and the presence of Will Graham.

Bedelia hums. She surveys him without blinking, and does not shy away from eye contact. She is brutally confident in herself and her position, though without the need to overcompensate her authority. It’s refreshing.

Hannibal would like very much to work in her department, indeed—if only for the ability to study her further.

“I assume you’ve been brushing up on your studies,” she says.

Hannibal nods. “I collected the curriculum from several of the professors and have been doing the current readings on my own time. The human brain is a mystery; new material is added as we discover it. The body itself is much more routine. Outside of genetic abnormalities, I find one person bleeds much the same as any other.”

Something flickers across her face, there and gone again. Hannibal considers the fraction he’d been able to survey, but categorizes it easily: unease. He has discomfited her. Bedelia du Maurier does not seem like a woman who encounters such a sensation often.

She must have good instincts.

Even better instincts when she smiles, a wan slip of a thing, and replies, “And despite this, no two minds are alike. I would imagine you and I have very different perceptions of the world.” She inhales and exhales slowly, and her eyes drift away from him. For a moment, she is far away in thought, but only for long enough for her mind to settle. She returns her attention to Hannibal. “And because of that, we have different things to offer in our care of patients.”

Hannibal stares at her. He waits. He senses it’s not an outright rejection, or perhaps not a rejection at all. She studies him carefully in kind.

And then she relents with a small, satisfied nod. “I believe you have the attentiveness and disposition of a worthy psychiatrist, Doctor Lecter. I will submit a favorable review for you to the board when it comes time to match our new residents.”

Hannibal inclines his head. “Thank you, Doctor Du Maurier.”

When he doesn’t move to stand, she purses her lips. “Is there something else I can do for you?”

“To familiarize myself with your department, with your permission, it would be my privilege to shadow one of the current fellows.” A tilt of his chin. “At your discretion, and at whatever time is most convenient, should you agree. I needn’t come into contact with any patients if privacy is a concern—I’d simply like to learn the layout, as well as what to expect of a day. I’m quite sure the change in a regular sleeping schedule will already be a shock to my system, when the time comes.”

Bedelia raises her brows, but seems agreeable enough. She hums in consideration, then leans forward to press a button on the intercom on her desk. “Alana, if I could borrow a moment of your time.”

“Right away, Doctor.”

Hannibal blinks; within a handful of moments, there is a soft knock at the door.

“Come in,” Bedelia calls.

A young woman pokes her head in carrying a clipboard. She’s a lovely little thing, perhaps Will’s age, with bright eyes and a nervous smile. Hannibal recognizes her as the young woman who was stationed at the small desk just outside Bedelia’s office. Her secretary, or perhaps an intern.

“Alana, this is Doctor Lecter,” Bedelia says. “Doctor Lecter, this is my intern, Alana Bloom, a fourth-year student here at Johns Hopkins Medical. She’s another of our applicants for the psychiatric residency.”

Alana’s mouth forms a tiny *o* of surprise. “Changing specialties?”

It’s a bold question, but a prudent one. Hannibal finds it amusing. “I have been reliably informed that fourteen hour shifts are rather uncommon in psychiatry.”

She grins, immediately at ease. “I sure hope so.” She turns her attention to Doctor Du Maurier. “What can I do for you?”

“I understand you’re shadowing Doctor Chilton next week. I was wondering if you wouldn’t be adverse to company.” Bedelia inclines her head to Hannibal. “And you, Doctor Lecter.”

“Not at all,” Hannibal answers with a smile.

Alana nods easily. “Sure, I don’t mind.”

Bedelia hums, satisfied. “Excellent. I’ll take care of arranging everything with Frederick.” She looks askance; it is not quite a roll of her eyes, but neither is it entirely polite. “He does so enjoy an audience, I’m sure he won’t mind.”

Alana snorts, then promptly covers her face with a hand. She flushes bright red with embarrassment at revealing herself so obviously; Bedelia sends her a scolding-but-humorous glance. Having read Frederick’s contributions to the recent psychiatric journals, and heard such unfavorable things about

his demeanor from Will, Hannibal already finds himself glad for the company of what seems to be a good-spirited young woman.

“Thank you, Alana,” Bedelia says with a small, polite smile and a certain fondness in her eyes. “That was all.”

Alana excuses herself with a little wave as she goes; she, too, looks relieved at the notion she won’t be facing Doctor Chilton alone. Hannibal makes a sound of faint amusement as he turns his attention back to Bedelia.

“I will email you the details,” Bedelia says, and is already writing a note to herself on a fine pad of stationary. “Of course, if your schedule interferes, don’t hesitate to inform me, and I can make other arrangements.”

“I’m sure Doctor Gideon would be willing to swap shifts with me if that’s the case,” Hannibal replies evenly.

“Then it’s settled.” Bedelia looks up, and something in her seems to be settled at Hannibal’s easy acceptance of Alana. Perhaps Bedelia considers her a good judge of character, or similarly perceives anyone who enjoys her to be tolerable. Hannibal is quite certain that Alana Bloom will be joining him in the residency program next autumn.

Hannibal rises and holds out his hand. “Thank you for making time to see me, Doctor Du Maurier. I appreciate your transparency.”

Bedelia, too, stands. Her handshake is firm and certain, her eye contact direct. Yes, Hannibal decides, working with her—or *for* her, as the matter stands—would be acceptable.

“And yours, Doctor Lecter,” Bedelia answers. “I’ll be in touch.”

Hannibal accepts it for the dismissal it is, and allows himself out. He offers Alana an approximation of a friendly smile as he exits, and heads for his car. He checks his phone along the way—it’s just after five. He debates sending a text to Will, but thinks better of it. No, he can wait a while. Will said he’d be busy for a time, and Hannibal would not want to seem impatient, or worse, *desperate.*

Perhaps he’ll head home and start on dinner instead.

Liver does taste so much better fresh, after all.

Will sees Margot to her UberLUX and obligingly kisses her cheek. She’s flushed, a little tipsy, but the girl driving greets Margot like a friend—unsurprising, since Margot rarely drives anywhere within the city—so Will doesn’t worry.

“I’ll call you tomorrow,” Will promises with a smile. “Text me when you get home.”

“I’ll send you some pictures,” Margot replies with an easy grin. “And we’ll make decisions from there.”

Will laughs. “You’re a menace.”

She winks, and Will closes the door. The Escalade pulls away from the curb, leaving Will with his hands in the too-small, too-tight pockets of his black jeans. He waits until she's gone before he starts walking the other direction.

He pulls out his phone as he starts off toward the parking garage.

>> I'll be there in 20.

<< I'll be waiting.

Chapter End Notes

reblog it here!

1:11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal does not oft find himself without control of his own thoughts, but once he's eaten the remainder of Caldwell's liver and the dinner plates have been cleared away, one seems to stick in his mind in particular: the house feels empty.

Hannibal has never minded being alone before now. In many cases, he's often preferred it. He can take whatever time he likes when cooking and eating, savor each bite if he so desires. He can curate each room of his home to its most aesthetically pleasing point, create perfectly-placed arrangements of priceless belongings.

He's never once felt like he's living within a museum until recently. The empty spaces on the walls beg not for artwork, but for a more personal touch. The austere furniture that is rarely used suddenly seems uninviting; Hannibal considers, if only for a moment, replacing his shapely statement pieces with vast and comfortable installations. By the time he finds himself in his study, distracted from the readings spread out across his desk, Hannibal realizes the source of his unease is not a *what* as much as a *who.*

He's never been one to ascribe the feeling of loneliness to himself prior to Will's unexpected arrival in his life. Now it seems he can think of nothing but.

Companionship. It's a strange notion.

Hannibal glances down at the desktop, at the screen of his phone reflecting the light of his lamp. He hesitates for only a moment, and then lifts it into his hand—it illuminates and displays the time, *10:38pm.*

Will said he would be out late, but surely he's on his way home by now, if not there already. He seemed to welcome the notion of Hannibal reaching out. And, Hannibal supposes, he should probably confirm what time he'll be removing Will's cast tomorrow. Yes, he has every reason to call Will. Perhaps after they speak, Hannibal will be able to put these thoughts from his mind and focus once more.

He presses *dial* and holds the phone to his ear. It rings one, two, three, four—

"Hey baby," Will says sweetly, and Hannibal's brain stutters to a halt. *"Give me just a minute, okay?"*

It picks up again in short accord, and takes in the background noise: loud music, a man's voice, the screech of a door hinge and the subsequent sounds of the outside.

"You're not alone," Hannibal replies, and swallows down the strangely bitter taste at the back of his tongue. "My apologies. I'll let you go."

"No, no. I was literally just leaving. Hang on—" A muffled sound, and Will must cover the mouthpiece of his cell, but Hannibal still hears it when he says, *"Thank you for meeting me again. I'll be in touch."*

Hannibal does not hear the reply. He leans back in his chair slowly as he listens to Will say a quick goodbye. He's immensely more aware of his teeth than he was a moment before. His hand falls into his lap; his fingers curl, and there's the faintest sting of pain before Hannibal realizes his nails have sunken into the meat of his outer thigh. He forces himself to relax. He is smoothing over the wrinkles he has wrought in his slacks when Will's voice returns. He sounds much more relaxed, much more himself. *"Yeah, sorry about that, I was getting dinner with a classmate."*

Hannibal pushes away from the desk. He stands.

Lie.

"Of course," he replies smoothly, and paces as he imagines Will must be pacing, headed perhaps for his vehicle, for his home. Hannibal, too, is on the move—restless.

Why would Will lie about who he's meeting?

"Don't worry," Will says, *"it wasn't half as good as lunch."*

Placation. Hannibal wonders if Will can sense his unease, or if it's simple flattery. At the very least, the sentiment sounds genuine. He swallows down his irritation and schools his voice into something smooth and light. "I'm pleased you enjoyed it. I'll have to cook for you again sometime."

"You know what they say about feeding strays, right? Better watch out, or you'll never get rid of me."

That assumes Hannibal wishes to be rid of him. Of course, he cannot say as much. Will's mind is too clever, and Hannibal is no fool. "Do you consider yourself a stray?"

"Maybe a little," Will replies with a dark, self-deprecating vein of humor. *"But maybe I always have been. It's not exactly a new state of affairs."*

Hannibal pauses in his path, close enough to feel the crackling heat of the fireplace. He touches the mantle, and for half a moment, his eyes flutter closed to enjoy the warmth. It's all too easy to imagine Will stretched out across the settee behind him, the length of his hair swept up and over the arm of it, long legs kicked up and over the other—perhaps with a glass of wine held between his manicured fingers, or maybe whiskey instead. Either way, illicit: Will is still a handful of weeks from being old enough to drink by this country's laws. Hannibal has always preferred the law of the home.

It's dangerous that he can picture Will at home here.

"Did you consider yourself secure when you lived with your father?"

Will laughs, and his voice is rough and warm. There's no slur to his words; there's a subtle rasp as though he's been speaking for some time. Meeting a classmate, indeed—one who he parted from with the words *I'll be in touch,* when a simple *see you tomorrow* would suffice. No, it's much more likely that Will is on a mission of his own. Hannibal will simply have to wait and see what it means for them both.

"Jumped straight to the daddy issues, huh, Doctor?"

It's a deflection, but it's effective. There's something about the way Will's subtle accent curls around the words that makes them nearly suggestive.

Hannibal inhales silently and turns away from the fire. With very little thought of purpose, he climbs onto the very settee he'd imagined Will on moments before, and stretches out in a shockingly

informal pose. He allows himself to assume Will's casual demeanor. It's… almost comfortable in its crudeness. Perhaps it will bring him closer to Will's state of mind.

"One's relationship with their parents can be telling of their overall place in life," Hannibal answers.

"Fortunate, then, that I can dodge this line of questions, since I have no relationship to speak of."

Hannibal's lips turn toward a smirk. "I suppose that answers my next question about your mother."

Will huffs. This sound is not half so amused. *"Some lazy psychiatry, Doctor Lecter."*

"Was it?" Hannibal asks. "I thought it rather clever."

"I'm sure you often think yourself clever."

Hannibal's smirk widens into a grin. "Often, yes. Perhaps more clever than you give me credit for." It's a tease and a warning, but perhaps Hannibal does not give Will enough credit, either.

"I think I give you enough credit," Will replies. *"That doesn't mean I have to give you all the answers."* Hannibal blinks slowly. Ah. So what Will's dishonesty (or perhaps lack of transparency) presents is a challenge. Before he can meet it, Will diverts him again. *"And for that matter, then, what about your parents?"*

He'll concede to Will… for now. This line of questioning provides an interesting opportunity to strengthen the bonds of circumstance between them. "They died when I was young."

The sound Will makes is one of understanding, but not of sympathy. The blows of their rapid exchange finally slow, gentle, and Will's empathy is a caress. His voice, when it comes, is soft. *"So you're as alone as I am."*

There's an understanding there, dawning and true. Being seen is an adjustment, Hannibal realizes. Being exposed by Will's sharp mind is disconcerting. But the sensation is growing on him. "Perhaps we're both alone without each other."

Will's sigh is so close, so intimate, that Hannibal's eyes close to better enjoy it. The room is dark but for the glow of the desk lamp and the fireplace, and though Hannibal *is* alone, in this moment, he doesn't feel it. It seems that even conversing with Will when he is not present is enough to satiate his need for intelligent interaction. They *are* intellectually compatible. It's a rare trait to find.

"Hang on, I'm at my car," Will says, and there's a distant beep and the sound of his door, the engine turning over. *"We always end up here, don't we?"*

Hannibal huffs, not quite a laugh. "To be fair, I didn't call to interrogate you about your parents, Will. I was simply following my curiosity through to the end."

"So what did you call for?"

"I thought I'd ask what time you'd like me to remove your cast tomorrow."

Will makes a pleased little hum. *"That depends when you'll be at work."*

"I work from two until midnight. Cases allowing, any time will do. Cast removal isn't a terribly time-consuming process." Hannibal sits upright at long last, turns and sets his feet on the floor. He stands again, and sets off toward the kitchen. A glass of wine sounds pleasant at the moment.

"I'll text you. Speaking of, did you get my schedule?"

"I did," Hannibal confirms. He crouches in the kitchen to peruse his wine cooler, and selects the open bottle of Chateau Margaux 2004, the fine red he'd paired with this evening's liver. He fetches a bordeaux glass from the cabinet, and pours himself a generous measure. "It's an ambitious lineup."

*"You're one to talk. Do you work **any** shifts under twelve hours?"*

Hannibal's lips quirk in a wry smile. "Not often. Though I've found myself recently with a reason to consider a more generous schedule."

Will doesn't balk; Hannibal's smile widens. *"You were considering psychology before I came along. When your supervisor complains, you better not blame that on me."*

"I wouldn't dream of it, my dear."

Will huffs, skeptical. *"Well, whatever. I'll try to swing by tomorrow evening."*

Hannibal corks the dregs of the bottle firmly and puts it back in the cooler. He takes his glass back to the study, and unbuttons his waistcoat as he goes. He sets it on the desk, then drapes his brocade vest over the back of the office chair. "I'll endeavor to be free, so long as there are no pressing emergencies."

"Oh, yes," Will replies, terribly droll, *"I'll be so very upset if my de-casting doesn't take precedence over a car accident. I'm not gonna worry if I have to wait to see you, Doctor."*

Hannibal lifts the glass to his lips and takes a long, measured sip. He mulls the words over in his mind, but eventually decides to say them, anyway. "I hope you don't plan on calling me Doctor around my colleagues."

"Why not?" Will asks, and there's a hint of cheek to his tone. *"I thought it was only polite to refer to you by your title. You worked so hard for it, after all. By the time we're done, you may be a doctor twice over."*

A flicker of darkness passes through Hannibal's mind. By the time he's done with Will, he may very well be a doctor ten times over, MD and PhD et al. He knows he can't say as much, no matter how he'd like to. "Polite, perhaps. However, it gives the wrong sense of familiarity. Our aim is to appear close, is it not?"

*"Short of getting caught with our pants down, I don't think your coworkers will have any doubt about how **close** we are if Price runs his mouth like Bev seems to think he will."*

The reminder of their encounter elicits a flash of heat, curling pride and pleasure in the pit of his belly. Hannibal sits, running his fingertips over the smooth pages of the textbook. "As fond as my memories are of the morgue, I do believe that sort of thing is better suited to supply closets and private offices, if Doctor Price himself is to be believed."

Will chokes, coughs, and barks a laugh. *"Jesus. Bev didn't mention that."*

"No, I supposed not." Hannibal smiles to himself. He's rather fond of Will's startled laugh. It's especially honest, strangely endearing. He takes another sip of his wine and glances down at the thick, heavy tome. Even in modern times, psychiatry texts can be especially dry reading. "I should probably get back to my studies."

Will makes an understanding, albeit withdrawn hum of consent. *"I need groceries, anyway."* His voice lowers to a grumble. *"I was waiting for the ad revenue from **Analysis** to hit, but I guess I'm just gonna have to be careful."*

Hannibal blinks slowly. He sips. "Are financials a concern for you?"

Will doesn't respond at first. When he does, he still sounds irritated. *"Not when the site's reliable. I dunno, I guess the spike in activity raised a potential bot flag. It got submitted for review. Go figure."*

Hannibal frowns at his glass. "Would you like me to—"

"Don't you even finish that sentence," Will growls. *"Don't think I didn't find out how much those goddamn gala tickets cost, Hannibal."*

It's a thrill to hear his name snarled like that, even if it's for all the wrong reasons. "I'm a patron of the fine arts. I would be attending the gala regardless of your company, and likely with a guest I have no taste for. Your companionship is preferable and mutually advantageous."

*"Bullshit. Not about the patron part, I fully believe that you'd be going by yourself if I wasn't with you. But I **don't** believe you'd be bringing a guest if it weren't for me."*

Hannibal smiles to himself. "Presumptuous of you, don't you think?" He murmurs, even though Will is exactly right.

*"No, I don't just **think.** You're not the only one with important friends."*

Well *that* certainly strikes Hannibal's curiosity. "Is that so?"

Will grumbles. *"Do you think you're the only one who's ever noticed me? Or noticed **you,** for that matter?"* Something about Will's phrasing raises Hannibal's hackles. He can't quite place the what or why. But as soon as it occurs, Will is simmering down again. *"Sorry,"* Will murmurs. *"Sorry. I'm just tired and hungry. I don't mean to be an asshole. Fuck."* There's a hollow thud of something being struck, likely Will's palm impacting the steering wheel.

Hannibal considers this. He pushes his glass away, the last few sips rich and wonderful and waiting, but not for this moment. No. Strangely enough, his concern is for reassuring Will and soothing his nerves.

What a terrible impulse. Hannibal also finds it impossible to resist.

"I'm not offended, Will. I know this must be a departure from what you're used to."

"There's no excuse for a bad attitude." The words sound rehearsed, but not his own. Hannibal wonders if it's the ghost of Will's father whose voice he's hearing now. Will heaves a heavy sigh. His car slows, his wheels crunch against the gravel. In a handful of seconds, Hannibal hears the vehicle come to a stop, but no sound to signify him exiting. When Will speaks, he sounds defeated. *"I'm sorry."*

"Will," Hannibal replies, drawn by suspicion of some underlying issue. Will is not usually so swift to be contrite. "How long has it been since you ate? Answer me honestly."

There is hesitation, and then there's an answer. *"Lunch."*

Hannibal's hands slowly curl to fists on the tabletop. They flatten just as swiftly, but the frustration remains. "Do you have the funds to feed yourself?" Will's reply is vague, a mumble. Hannibal thinks he hears some mention of *Winston* something or another, so he persists. "Will. Tell me."

"Yeah, I do."

Hannibal purses his lips. "Are you lying to me, Will?"

"...no. There won't be much, but I'll be ok. I had to buy dog food first. Winston doesn't deserve to go hungry."

Hannibal feels the points of his canines with his tongue and narrowly resists biting at his own mouth hard enough to bleed. "Neither do you." Will makes a noncommittal noise like the concept is ridiculous. Hannibal wants to shake him, pin him by his throat until he's forced to accept his own worth, to yield to the vision Hannibal sees within the blurring outlines of his shape. Will's potential, solidified; his evolution, complete. A creature strong and confident enough to understand his place in the world, to demand the veneration he deserves. "Will—"

"Look, stop, I'll go get something," Will says, abrupt but vaguely apologetic. It seems his resistance to being looked after has reached the breaking point for the day. *"I'll see you tomorrow."*

"Will."

*"Good**night,** Doctor Lecter."*

Will hangs up on him. Hannibal is left with his fingers clenching convulsively around the phone, his pride on the proper side of too stubborn to call him back. No. If Will wants to act childish and avoid the issue, then that is his prerogative. If he wishes to refuse Hannibal's help, well, there is nothing he can do to force it at this juncture.

No matter how much he'd like to.

Hannibal sets the screen face-down. Irritation and annoyance bubble just beneath his skin. It is not entirely Will's fault, he knows. It's the product of his raising, his modest upbringing. Hannibal himself would deny charity given out of pity rather than good intentions. His pride demands nothing less.

But Will—

Well, Hannibal will simply have to win his trust. That, or find some other way to give Will what he needs and will never ask for.

Hannibal drains the last of his glass and barely tastes it. It's a shame; the wine is wonderful, truly, but Hannibal is simply no longer in the mood to enjoy it. He has too much energy fizzling through his nerves, excess electricity that needs to be worked off.

It seems he won't be concentrating on his studies tonight, after all.

He closes his textbook.

Reaches for the rolodex.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter Notes

> **CONTENT WARNING LISTED IN THE END NOTES.** So, this went places really fast, and unexpectedly so. Keep in mind that there's both some sexual content [don't worry, we're not getting too spicy.... yet] *and* violent content that may be upsetting to some. Mind the tags and the warnings. In some regards, this chapter marks the end of the opening action of this fic. Things will start chugging along from here re: The Plot.
>
> Good luck.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Anger follows Will's footsteps like a stray through the aisles of the grocery store. It nips at his heels, winding around his ankles whenever he slows enough to lift something from a shelf and put it in his modest basket.

Yes, his account is running lower than he'd prefer. He doesn't touch the money that sustains the house, his bills, his taxes—that's all separate, and for all intents and purposes, Will pretends it doesn't exist. Could he draw from it if he needed? Yes. But it would feel like a failure.

His savings are *supposed* to be fed by the revenue from Abnormal Analysis. With the hold recently put on his direct deposit… well, he keeps a close eye on prices as he picks out enough dietary staples to get him by for the week. He skips store brands and chooses generic. He calculates the tax in his head down to the penny, mindful of his latest account statement. When the hold clears, he'll be just fine—but right now, things are tight.

Will runs his fingers through his bangs and pushes them out of his eyes. He's exhausted, overworked, irritated. His meeting tonight has not been the first and will not be the last with this source, and he's fortunate he has something to show for it.

There are copies of Andrew Caldwell's medical reports tucked safely in the center console of his car. More information, *any* information that may lead Will closer to the Ripper is worth any price. But what he's given in exchange is not of monetary value, but emotional value.

Understanding. Empathy. Companionship. Advice. The insight Will offers always sticks in his mind, warns him of the dangers that can come from a conventional life. Unhappiness, boredom, being surrounded by people who don't understand, and who only wish to mold one into the shape they better desire.

His source is grown, smart, and capable. He has all the makings of a stellar life, but for his dissatisfaction with his personal relationships. He's an easy mark, an easy target. He's eager to talk about himself, eager for understanding and sympathy.

And he works at Johns Hopkins.

He is precisely the cover that Will needs to protect himself and to protect Hannibal should they fall under suspicion.

Of course, he doesn't want to *tell* Hannibal that—the more he knows about Will's contingency plan, the more likely he is to interfere in it. Circumstance has presented Will with an opportunity for Hannibal's plausible deniability.

It's his duty to protect Hannibal as his *primary* source, no matter how infuriated the man makes him.

Will takes a breath and lets it out. He plucks a box of generic pasta from the shelf and drops it into his basket, then carries on. Of course a man who can afford to drop *ten thousand dollars* on a glorified party ticket wouldn't understand. Will's obligations come before himself. They have to. His home, his education, Winston—they are all Will's responsibility, under his protection. They take priority.

Will's been doing okay since his dad died. He doesn't need someone rich to come along and solve all his problems. There's honor in honest work, there's wisdom to be found in hard times. Though Will endeavors to be comfortable someday, he hopes he doesn't ever forget what it's like to be where he is now.

He's surviving. He's doing just damn fine.

And maybe his source's problem is that he's forgotten that sort of thing. The man's so wrapped up in appearances. He hates his wife, hates his *life.* He comes to *Will* for sympathy because Will can see beneath his self-important facade, see the frustrated creature prowling beneath his skin. He's so desperate to escape the hole he's dug himself into that he's willing to risk his career giving Will confidential information in exchange for… what? A friendly ear? A shoulder to lean on?

His source is clever, truly. But he's also an idiot. If he wants to give Will exactly what he's looking for without a fuss, then Will has no compunctions in accepting *that* kind of charity. At least Hannibal has the good sense to ask for more for what he offers in return. Not. Not—

Will *doesn't* need a hand-out.

And he doesn't *need* Hannibal.

But—

Sometimes the lines of Will's self blur. Tonight, he's empathized too deeply with his source, absorbed too much of his disdain. The lingering sense of helplessness, of aggression and frustration, cling to Will like a second skin. In combination with the guilty unease that came from paying for Margot's drinks despite his dwindling account, Will feels cagey. Trapped within himself. Irritated with where he is in life, and desperate to change it.

Not all of those feelings are his own, but they stick to him regardless.

Will growls under his breath. The cold fluorescent light of the grocery store feels surreal; the hum of the coolers and the buzz of cart wheels against the tile floors feel stark and strange against the deep dark that peeks through the windows to the outside. Will looks up and sees himself reflected. Over the edge of the lenses of his glasses, he sees himself in double.

Two sides of himself. His lines are blurring.

He needs to calm down. He needs to get home. Winston is probably hungry. It's not *his* fault that Will maintains his awful hours, he doesn't deserve—

Neither do you.

Will inhales slowly. He holds it til the count of ten, and when he exhales, he keeps his eyes on his reflection. Frizzy, messy bun. Oversized jacket, a cast poking out from under one sleeve. Long legs, black denim, heeled boots. He's the same person he was this afternoon. The same person who Hannibal drove halfway across the state to visit and bring him lunch.

Will shouldn't have snapped at him.

The realization drains the rage from his body, and the tension from Will's shoulders. How long has it been since someone cared enough to check on on Will, to make sure he ate at appropriate intervals? Margot hadn't even noticed. Bev is a good friend, but they see each other too infrequently. Peter is busy enough trying to hold himself together. Will's father is dead and gone. His mother has never been there at all.

And against all rhyme and reason, the one person remaining is Hannibal, who seems determined to place himself firmly within the daily comings and goings of Will's life—at least temporarily. To check on him. To talk to him.

It's terrifying, realizing how lonely Will has been for the past few months. He was never even aware of it until now. Will rubs at his eyes, shoving his glasses up his forehead. When he pulls his hand away, the back of his hand is smeared with eyeliner.

"Shit," he mutters. He laughs to himself, quiet and bleak, and carries on.

Will swipes himself through the self-checkout in silence. Milk. Rice. Pasta. Jarred tomato sauce. Will has some vegetables left over and frozen at home that he can work his way through, the remainder of what he'd grown out back in the small patch in his yard. He's sure he can trade eggs from his neighbor in exchange for adjusting the fence around her coop, making it taller so the foxes can't get in. Honest work for an honest exchange. It's one of the things Will likes best about living in Wolf Trap—it reminds him of home.

And his modest menu makings remind him of home, too. The rice and pasta will stretch through the week. Will can catch fish from the river out back. If push comes to shove, Will can find odd jobs to supplement income for the rest. It's not as easy in the winter when there's no snow yet to speak of—there's no lawns that need mowing, and no driveways that need shoveling. Instead, everything's just cold, and not even so cold that there are cars or heaters he can repair.

Ten thousand dollars. Ten thousand *fucking* dollars. The thought blows Will's mind, and he steadies himself too quickly against the self-register as a wave of lightheadedness hits him. He hisses in pain as his cast impacts the scale. Then he finishes bagging his groceries, pays his bill, and loops the handles of the bags over the plaster shell.

Will bristles at the sidelong look the self-register attendant gives him. He's new, young, doesn't know Will and Will doesn't know him. His eyes linger on Will's heeled boots, squinting with distaste.

Will makes sure his steps are pointedly loud as he stalks away.

He stops outside when the cold air hits him, tugs his hair down from the bun that's been slowly but surely giving him a headache. Will runs his fingers through his hair to free it from tangles and pulls his jacket closer around himself. It's getting colder. Thanksgiving is only just a short few weeks away, and the first frosts have already started. He'll have to switch to his real winter coat soon, but the thought of putting Beau's jacket away for the season is a melancholy one, tinged with nostalgia.

Will sighs, and his breath steams in the air. He reaches into the crepe-thin plastic bag and pulls the single protein bar free. He unwraps it and holds it between his teeth as he digs for the keys in his pocket.

And he sighs. Pauses. Takes his phone out instead.

>> I'm sorry that I snapped at you. I'm not used to people worrying about me. I did get some groceries and I'm going home now.

He sends it. It doesn't feel like enough.

>> Thank you for caring. I appreciate it.

There's no immediate reply, but Will didn't exactly expect one. He busies himself loading his car and driving home, listening to the sounds of the road and the hum of the radio in the background. The protein bar is appropriately disgusting, but by the time Will is pulling into his driveway, he has to admit he feels better. He digs Caldwell's files from their safe storage place and gathers his bags. He has a long night ahead of him.

Will unzips his boots inside the door, putting the grocery bags down and switching to his steel-toed work boots. Winston nearly bowls him over in excitement and, of course, the desire to be let outside. Will leaves the groceries where they lay and follows him into the dark. He wanders out into the field, through the cut path in the tall grass. Winston, given the permission of Will's presence, darts off into the shadows.

Will walks out far. The cold is bracing but not entirely unpleasant. Winter nights in the country are damn near silent once it's cold enough for the bugs to hibernate. There are no buzzing insects, no chirping crickets. There's only the distant howl of a coyote in the distance, and the rustling of the grass as Winston blunders through.

When Will turns back, his house is a beacon; the living room light is a golden glow. The stars above are bright, unpolluted by city lights. It reminds him of the ocean, of crewing fishing boats in the bare hours of the morning, miles from shore. It was hard work, but a simpler time.

Nothing feels simple anymore. Not when there's a murder victim's medical records waiting for his attention, a killer hovering on the edge of Will's awareness.

And one person in his life who has the audacity to give a damn about Will's wellbeing.

Will checks his phone. No reply. With shame and nerves making a mess of his stomach, Will swallows his pride and presses *dial.*

Hannibal doesn't pick up.

Will awakes slowly in the morning, fighting against the cold gray of the early morning. He'd stayed up too late the night before poring over the files, searching for clues. Somewhere there will be *something,* some detail as to how the Ripper found Caldwell and decided on him. He's the most recent victim, and Will's best shot. If he can figure out how the Ripper chose him, maybe Will can figure out how he picked the rest.

But his search thus far has been fruitless, and Will has only a headache and an empty stomach to show for his efforts.

It's all he's ever had where the Ripper is concerned.

Will pulls himself out of bed with a groan and sets about his routine, letting Winston out into the yard with a yawn. Caldwell's report is still spread across his desk. Thirty-six, no wife, no children. An unremarkable life as an independent medical examiner. Good health history. No major incidents. An address outside of Bethesda. He owned and drove an SUV.

It's nothing. It's less than nothing. Of course it is, that's how the Ripper *works.*

Will flips the reports over and shuffles them into a pile. Well, there's no use in worrying about it now. The Chesapeake Ripper is blessedly consistent, and it's been days since the last body. The next will be soon, a new canvas for Will to survey.

In the meantime, he has his own canvas to attend to.

Will whistles out the door, waiting for Winston to return before he locks up and heads for the shower. The process takes longer since he still has to wrap his cast before bathing; he hasn't bothered to keep the roll of cling wrap in the kitchen since he first came home from the hospital. It's an annoyance, but it's necessary. Will strips out of his night clothes and kicks them into a pile, cranks the shower on and waits for it to warm, until steam billows and he climbs inside to savor the feeling of the hot water.

He tips his head back into the flow and feels the heat of the water over his skin, weighing his curls to his scalp, sticking to his shoulders. There's something calming about being submerged, something therapeutic about taking the time to scrub through his hair and subsequently detangle it. There's a sensuality in the smooth slide of conditioner through his fingers, creating ringlets where frizz usually reigns supreme. Will likes that he's able to buy his own shampoo now, take up as much space on the shelf as he desires for pretty, frivolous things. He prefers the scent of peach and vanilla to whatever the hell the scent of male-coded body wash is supposed to smell like. Sometimes he takes the time to shave his legs, but not always; really, whenever the mood strikes. Less likely in the winter, more often in the summer—but there's no comparison to the feeling of bare legs on smooth sheets when he sleeps at night. Life's little pleasures and whatnot.

It's only when he's stripped bare that he feels the pressures of being anyone else fade away. It's only when no one else is around that he feels… whole. Unconcerned with what he is or isn't. Wilhelmina settles under his skin, and Will's mind comes to calm. For a moment in time, there is unity between them, and it feels like peace.

And with peace comes… other things. Here, he's safe. Alone. But in his mind's eye, he's *not* alone. The tension he hadn't allowed himself to process from being near Hannibal comes back all at once, leaving invisible imprints of hands all over his body, strong and sure, rich with possession. There's not even so much as *bruises,* but the memories feel like brands.

Will shudders and shivers and bites his lip as he presses the heel of his hand to his cock. Fuck, he wishes he'd given himself more time, not taken so long getting himself out of bed. His hands feel too small, too familiar, but he gives in regardless. When his legs fall open, he imagines a thigh pushing them apart; when his spine bends forward and his cast braces against the wall, Will imagines the heat comes from a body pressed tight and close against his back.

He wants. God, he *wants.* It's been so long since he wanted anyone at all, but—

“Hannibal,” Will whispers and water streams into his mouth, into his eyes, and he can imagine it’s not his own hand around his cock squeezing and stroking, that he’s being held still and surrounded, touched and consumed, that there’s imperfect teeth scraping over his shoulder and a voice in his ear that wants him right back. And Hannibal *does* want him, doesn’t he? There’s no doubt in Will’s mind that he could *have* this if he wanted, but he can’t *let* himself.

God, why is he so *mean?* Snapping left and right at the only person that seems to give a damn, and he *knows* Hannibal has his own agenda, but fuck, doesn’t everyone? Doesn’t *he?*

Will arches up and wishes there was weight there to hold him down. His wrist twists and he whines, squeezes cruelly at the base of his cock like he’s not the one depriving himself. The lights filters through his eyelids and Will imagines everything going dark, fingers over his eyes, fingers in his mouth, *fuck.* Maybe he just needs someone to shut him up, quiet his mind, make him stop fucking *thinking—*

He gasps and his hips twitch, his grip tightens and slides so goddamn *good,* and Will strokes himself through the height of his orgasm thinking that maybe Margot was right. Maybe now or later, getting into bed with Hannibal is inevitable. The desire is there. There’s no clear line drawn, no boundaries or walls built between them other than the ones of Will’s own making. He could knock them down, knock it *all* down. *Take,* and let himself be taken.

Fuck, he *wants* that.

And maybe he *needs* that lifeline, needs Hannibal to take him by the throat and drag him from the depths of solitude. The Ripper has been Will’s anchor for so long that he’s forgotten what being afloat even *feels* like. If Will can stop drowning, give death its due and its time, but also remember how to *live* again, would that really be so bad?

Every artist needs a muse, Margot said, and Hannibal’s presence in his life has already brought him new insight and awareness. Maybe it can go both ways. Maybe Hannibal is *Will’s* unexpected.

Will moans as the water rolls over his twitching limbs, his shaking fingers. He washes the evidence of his desire down the drain and follows it with grapefruit body wash, coconut oil conditioner. He stands in the stream until he’s clean, dazed and blinking under the aftershocks of pleasure and unbidden epiphanies.

Will turns off the water and emerges into the cold, wraps himself bodily in one towel and his hair in another. From there, it’s business as usual, but nothing *feels* usual. Will squeezes his hair damp-dry and unwraps it, massages leave-in conditioner through to the ends, finds his part with a fine-toothed comb. He ties it back only for long enough to brush his teeth without getting hair in his mouth. When he lifts his head and looks at himself in the mirror, yes, the circles under his eyes look darker, but he *feels* more awake than he has in a while.

Hopeful, maybe. Is that the right word for what he feels? But before hope comes common sense. None of this means anything if he can’t apologize to Hannibal properly.

He can only *hope* he hasn’t fucked things up too badly before anything even starts.

Will gets dressed, throwing things in his bag as he goes. No worries today, no filming, just class—he pulls on tight jeans and a sweater, charcoal-gray and oversized that slouches off his shoulder and exposes the lacy strap of a blue bralette. Casual and comfortable. Will leaves his hair free and rushes through his makeup, anxious not to get caught in the morning rush traffic. Gray liner, smokey eye, quick contour, berry chapstick. He’s got it down to a science. He grabs an old beanie on his way out

the door and crams it down over his drying curls, the simple silver studs in his ears—then rushes back inside to fill Winston's bowl with an emphatic apology.

Phone, wallet, keys, glasses—check. Will pulls on his coat and zips up his heeled boots, hoping it doesn't snow. His bag thuds painfully against his hip with the weight of his laptop and his camera inside.

He gets in the car, starts it. Blasts the heat.

Calls Hannibal.

It rings, rings, rings.

"Damn it," Will mutters as he throws the car into reverse and backs out of the driveway. But then—

"Good mor—" A yawn. *"My apologies. Good morning, Will."*

Guilt and relief war for Will's attention, but neither wins compared to Hannibal. Will glances at the car clock and sees *6:34am.* "Shit, I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking. Did I wake you up?"

"I'm usually an early riser, you've simply beaten my internal clock." Hannibal's voice is warm, pleasant, rough from disuse. Will feels like an idiot; of *course* Hannibal was asleep. Any reasonable person would be.

"I'm sorry for last night," Will says in a rush, barely focused as he reflexively follows the roads out of Wolf Trap toward the highway. "I texted you after and of course you didn't get them because it was probably after midnight and it's still early and I just woke you up. You were trying to look out for me and I was a bitch."

There's a rustle on the other line that Will attributes to one rolling over in bed. A pang of helpless fondness hits him in the chest and pulls his lips toward a smile. Huh. Fluffy Hannibal, not quite put-together and perfect. There's a thought.

"Your apology is accepted, so long as you accept that I wasn't particularly upset about it in the first place." Hannibal hums with thought. *"Though I suppose I should count myself fortunate that you were concerned enough about my feelings to call me first thing in the morning."*

"You're astonishingly verbose for someone who's been called first thing in the morning," Will retorts.

"You're astonishingly verbose for someone who called me first thing in the morning to apologize for being 'a bitch'."

Will balks. He must make some kind of terrible noise, because the next thing he knows, Hannibal is laughing, and the sound is so nice that it doesn't even *matter* that he's laughing at Will.

"I was just trying to be polite," Will grumbles, though he's smiling and thinks Hannibal can probably hear it. He flips his directional as he turns onto the interstate and heads north.

"I think we've moved past that, don't you?" Hannibal replies. *"Polite and impolite. It seems you and I simply **are**, and we do our best to accommodate level ground between the niceties and animosities as we go."*

Will's heart thuds weakly at the words, at the ease with which Hannibal aligns them. Like Will is anything more than an exhausted and ungrateful student, and like Hannibal is anything less than an

accomplished, well-off surgeon to whom Will is a convenient distraction and a psychiatric curiosity. "Are you saying I shouldn't apologize anymore when I piss you off?"

"If this is to become our normal state of affairs, then indeed, perhaps not. I know I will find myself apologizing again and you'll tire of that eventually, so we have to consider using apologies sparingly." Hannibal sounds amused by the notion. *"If I ever truly feel that you have wronged me enough to warrant an apology, I promise, I shall ask you for such. I make a point in keeping my promises."*

"I should hope so, given the nature of promises," Will replies. He merges into traffic and sets his foot on the pedal, minding the flow of the vehicles. It's not a terribly far drive between Wolf Trap and College Park, but given that he has to skirt the perimeter of D.C. to get there, he tries to give himself as much time with his commute as possible. Accidents are unfortunately common on the thruway. Will avoids rush hour traffic as much as possible, which is easier to do if he stays out late in the evenings—less so in the mornings, when it seems everyone has somewhere to be much at the same time.

"You'd be surprised at how quick most are to break them."

Will huffs a laugh. "I really wouldn't."

"...no, I suppose not."

Wolf Trap isn't far from the Maryland state line, and as Will approaches the bridge over the Potomac, he notices the signs of slowing traffic. He groans.

"Are you alright?" Hannibal asks in concern.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Will grumbles, and leans forward in the driver's seat. He peers ahead and sees that the cars are still mobile, albeit at less than half speed—maybe if he's lucky, it'll be nothing more than a fender bender that's easily avoided. "Looks like a jam up ahead or something. Son of a bitch."

"Can you go around?"

Will creeps over the bridge and grimaces when he realizes he's already past the only feasible exit point, even if he meant to turn around and backtrack. He'd still end up late for his eight thirty class—going the long way around would take him south, cutting straight through D.C. itself. That commute is usually more than an hour, and adds an extra thirty or forty miles in addition to what he's already driven. "No, I'm already past the turnoff. Gotta keep going, I guess."

He passes the Maryland welcome sign at a grueling fifteen miles per hour. Not far past it, traffic grinds to a complete and total halt. Will laughs bitterly. Horns are blaring, impatient drivers sticking their heads out their windows, all to no avail. Strangely enough, Will doesn't see any *oncoming* traffic, either.

"Will?"

Suspicion picks at the back of Will's mind. The lanes are separated by heavy concrete barricades. Short of a vehicle busting through one of them, he can't imagine why there's no cars coming from the opposite direction. Sure, not many people head *in* to rural Virginia, but there would definitely be *someone* headed home at this time of the morning. Night shifters, truckers—this is the Capitol Region.

Cars are lining up behind him, and quickly. Even without the ability to turn off properly, Will is now completely and totally boxed in. He's not going anywhere fast.

And now he's curious.

"Will, are you still there?"

"Hang on," Will says, and plucks his phone from its honorary place riding shotgun in the cup holder. He switches the audio output from Bluetooth to the phone's inline speakers, then kills the engine. Will crams his keys in his pocket and kicks his bag under the passenger seat. He can only hope it won't be stolen, but it's too heavy to carry with him. "Still with me?"

"Always," Hannibal says, and the sincerity makes the breath catch in Will's lungs. Hannibal carries on without noticing. *"What's going on?"*

Sirens in the distance, faint as the coyote from the night before. Smoke. Will moves on autopilot forward, forward.

Screaming.

"Something happened," Will says, and a sense of terrible foreboding sits like a stone inside his chest. His heels click against the ground and his footsteps speed. He dodges around opening doors, around angry and confused fellow drivers and passengers, slipping sideways between cars and vans as he nears the source.

"What do you see?"

"There's some kind of accident—" Will weaves through the cars and smells burning gasoline. Fire. Metal. "Jesus."

Hannibal's voice gets sharp, serious. *"An accident? Will, do be careful. Damaged vehicles can be volatile. I don't want you to be hurt."*

"I'll be fine," Will replies on autopilot, because as of now he *is* fine. The people up ahead are decidedly *not* fine.

Will draws around the bend in the interstate, and the sound of his feet hitting the ground only partially drowns out Hannibal's growl. *"Will—"*

It doesn't matter.

No, it doesn't matter at all.

"Jesus *fucking* Christ," Will says.

An overturned semi takes up both sides of the highway, twisted into a near-unrecognizable shape by the full-speed impacts of other cars, torn to bits. People scramble from their vehicles, some piled three or four high, sideways, upside-down. There's crying. Screaming. Oil on the tarmac—or is it blood? Is it both? Sirens wail loud enough to pierce his ears, and flashing lights overwhelm his vision. They reflect off the sea of shattered glass that covers the road, shine directly into his eyes.

Will's casted hand clenches so hard around the phone that his fingers hurt.

It's a fucking bloodbath.

“I’m gonna have to call you back,” Will says weakly, and feels something inside him freeze over like the depths of Hell itself.

“Will. What is happening?”

“There’s gotta be thirty cars,” Will says, and presses his free hand over his mouth. “All piled up, people are trapped, Hannibal, I—”

“Will, I’m getting a call from the hospital on the other line—”

Will’s eyes lift higher, higher. When he sees it, he knows it’s the cause of the chaos below. He laughs, but the sound is awful. Maybe it’s a sob.

“Will?”

“There’s a body hanging from the overpass.”

Hannibal goes silent.

Will’s is numb. His throat clicks with the force of his swallow, and his teeth snap together. The scents of fire and death consume his senses. Nowhere he looks is free from the destruction, but for the simple serenity of the tableau before him. There is shockingly little blood on the body suspended in the sky. Instead, it’s smeared and splattered all over the Capitol Beltway.

“It’s the Ripper,” Will says. “It’s one of his.”

Chapter End Notes

tw: multi-car pile up resulting in a LOT of death and destruction (main characters not involved, but witness the aftermath)

and, uh, fair warning that this obviously isn't over and will carry into the next chapter, and the consequences beyond that. but this is hannibal fandom, i figure you guys expected this at *some* point.

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Chapter Notes

> TW for blood and minor character death due to the aftereffects of a major car wreck. If that sort of thing squicks you, I warn you to proceed with caution, and perhaps skip ahead to Hannibal's section after the first few lines of Will's.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The call cuts out.

Will is lucky he still has the presence of mind to hold his phone and hold it tight. He has one moment suspended in time. The pragmatic part of his brain whispers that this may be his only chance, the only scene he ever sees with his own eyes, so he takes a picture—because he has to. He has to be as close as he can get, even if *close* really means *too close*.

Then Will jams his phone in his pocket, even though he'd rather throw it down to shatter on the pavement and blow his life before this morning to bits.

Around him is Hell. Hell, with one exception:

The Hanged Man—Will recognizes him immediately. It's a classic piece of iconography.

The man is suspended upside-down from his right ankle, his left leg crossed behind gracefully at the knee, and arms folded behind his back. It's casual, almost. It lacks the clumsy pull of gravity, and the clothes are the same—red pants and a blue shirt, somehow defying the laws of physics, held perfectly in place as though the man were standing upright.

A halo of blond hair is the exception as it hangs downward, fluttering around the man's head with the air currents, the plumes of smoke and ash rising from below. The hellish orange light from the putrid oil fire casts the skull in a terrifying light—for indeed, there is no face or flesh to speak of on the surface. Everything from scalp to throat has been carefully cut away, and the bone wiped clean down to white.

The hanging saint has been peeled back like a ripe fruit, revealing Death below.

The only blood that Will can see on the victim is a stain on the man's shirt, a perfectly excised hole that coincides with the left pectoral: his heart has been removed.

The murder, like The Hanged Man, is a pendulum bound in place, moving neither forward nor backward from its tether. It cannot move beyond present circumstances or relinquish control, no matter how it desperately needs to. Its release will bring about, not death itself in such crude terms, but an evolution. With it, he will become something, some*one* new.

Will stares up at it until his eyes start to water. Until the scent of the fire and the death and the burning fills his nose and forces its way out through his tear ducts. Until he can ignore the carnage below no

longer, and is forced to tear his attention away from the masterpiece hanging above him.

Will squeezes his eyes shut and feels tears roll over his cheeks, pool in the creases of his mouth, fall from his chin. He takes a breath and chokes on the scent of sizzling tar, then pulls his hair back; shoves his hat in his pocket and runs in to help.

He shouldn't. He's heard the horror stories of people suing those who helped them out of wrecks like this, but there are human lives in imminent danger from the gas fire spreading from the overturned cab of the semi. If it explodes and kills him, then he'll be damned if he doesn't help as many people as he can to escape before he dies.

It's hard work interlaced with terror. Each moment is uncertain as he hears the crackles and pops of blistering metal, and after some time, Will is no longer sure which of the blood stains came from him and which came from each person he helps escape. There are cops and EMTs screaming in his ears, urging him to get back, to get away, but they need every able body they can get to help them—and as long as Will is pulling people from the wreckage, he feels useful. He cuts open the palms of his hands, his fingers, until his hands are slick with fluid. There's blood dripping into his cast and sweat dripping off his face, but he keeps going.

If he can save his father's jacket after this, it'll be a miracle. If he can save *himself* in the midst of this, it'll be a miracle.

Will falls to his knees and helps a wild-eyed man pull a sobbing, screaming little girl out of a flipped teal Honda. The windshield shattered on impact, and the glass crunches beneath his knees. He can see the body of the girl's mother inside, saturated with red. The little girl's a pretty thing with auburn hair, huge blue eyes. She's lucky she escaped with only a shallow slice along her throat—if it were any deeper, she'd be still and silent as her mother, trapped inside that crushed metal shell.

"Thank you," the man cries, weak with exhaustion as he scrambles back with his daughter cradled in his lap. He holds her tight enough to bruise. "You saved her. You saved her. Bless you."

"Get her out of here," Will commands through his exhaustion, his desperation. "Get back. *You* save her."

"Thank god," the man says, and Will moves on. "Abby, Abby, thank god."

The next girl isn't much younger than Will—mid-teens, maybe. She pounds with bloody fists on the inside of an intact car window, trapped beside the broken body of a man who could certainly be her father.

"Shield your face!" Will commands, she she hurriedly obeys. He grabs the closest piece of debris he can find, some unidentifiable piece of a demolished vehicle, and smashes the window until it breaks.

She barely winces as she crawls over broken glass. Her pupils are huge, wide and black with adrenaline, limbs shaking. As soon as she's free, she reaches back inside. "Daddy!"

Will seizes her by the back of a jean jacket that is not nearly enough to keep her warm in the cold. Steam rises from the heat of her blood and sweat. Behind her, Will can see the smoke rise higher, knows the flaming wreck is spreading—he *pulls.* "He's gone!" Will snaps. "Come on, please!"

She struggles, fights him. She's strong and scrappy and doesn't give up easily, and Will would normally admire that if he weren't trying to save her from *dying.* "He's gone!" Will shouts again. "Kid, he's dead!"

She freezes. She looks back over her shoulder with angry, red-rimmed eyes and says, “We can *save* him!”

And Will wants to cry. He wants to cry, but he can’t. He has to keep going, he *has* to, for as long as he can. “No we can’t. You know we can’t.”

Her tears cut through the red smears on her cheeks. Pink drips from her chin, saturates her jacket. It’s the same goddamn color of the chapstick that’s still in Will’s bag back in his car, and he hates that. Fuck. He’s never wearing that color again, not after this.

But the girl lets him pull her away, lets him get her further from the fire, and a blonde-haired cop rushes over when she sees them get free. She nods solemnly, thankfully at Will—and Will recognizes her as one of the ones who’s been in as deep as he has, trying to save as many as she can, distracting the EMTs away from Will, directing them to save those who are trapped or unconscious.

And Will’s about to get there, himself. He’s done too much, pulled out more people than he can count. His body is on the verge of collapse. This girl, whoever she is, is the last one he’ll manage. He hauls her back by a grip on her collar, a mother dog carrying puppies back to the nesting box. He feels exhausted. This feels like labor, and she feels like *his* after all he’s been through, soaked in blood and tears.

“I want to go home,” she says, weak with exhaustion and shock. “I wanna go home. Please.” She turns to Will and throw her arms around him, even as he tries to shepherd her toward an ambulance, *any* ambulance.

“Don’t leave!” She shouts as Will tries to pull away. She’s imprinted on him, and what else can Will do? He’s hastily wrapped in a shock blanket by harried and pale-faced EMTs, ushered off to the side to make room for transport for those who are in more dire need of emergency care than the both of them. They lean against an intact concrete barricade fifty feet from the scene of the crash, and Will stares up at the Ripper’s omen like its jaws will open and temperance will spill from its mouth.

The Hanged Man and Death sway on their tether, but when Will looks at this tableau, all he can see is The Tower.

“Who are you?” asks the girl. She’s shaken, pale. Pretty, under the right circumstances—the right circumstances being *not here* and *not now.* “What’s your name?”

“Will,” he answers. He swallows hard and turns to her, offers his broken and bloody hand. “You?”

She shakes, and winces at the pressure. She doesn’t try to avoid his blood; if there’s a disease to be had, they’ll get it from one another regardless. In this moment in time, they are only concerned with being mutually alive. “Clarice.”

“I’m sorry about your father, Clarice,” Will replies. His throat feels tight. He clears it, and tries again. “Do you have anyone else? Anyone we can call?”

Clarice ducks her head, her matted hair falling into her face. She nods, hiccups, but does not cry. “My mom.”

Will pulls his phone from his pocket. The screen is cracked. He can’t find it in himself to care, because at least it lights up, at least it’s functional as he hands it to her. “Watch your fingers,” he warns. “Where’re you from?”

“West Virginia,” she whispers. He barely hears her over the wailing sirens, the shrieking cries, the distant car horns of those not close enough to see and understand the horrors happening here. “We were comin’ to see the Museum of Natural History. I—”

She doesn’t finish her sentence. She doesn’t dial out. She doesn’t do anything but hold his phone, and Will sees at least one missed call, sees the blurry shapes of an *H* and an *L* that are bisected by the fractured glass.

He nearly breaks, but he holds himself together. He has to, he has to. At least for now, he has to be strong, even though the sounds and the smells are closing in and drowning him. He’ll make it back to Hannibal when the time is right, but that time’s not now. Not yet.

“Call your Mama,” Will says softly, and maybe it’s the Louisiana breathing out of his bones, but all he can do is see a girl that’s just like him, say the things he wished someone had said when *his* dad died. He wished like hell that he’d had a mama of his own to call back then, but that’s just not the way of things. Maybe Clarice is luckier than him, after all.

But she does—she calls. She cries, and once she starts it pours from her, wave after wave of sorrow and grief.

Will puts his broken arm around her shoulders and holds her while she screams. He can feel one perched under his chin, but he can’t let it out.

He knows that if he starts, it’ll never stop.

The emergency room is chaos. There is no other word for it.

As soon as Will’s call cuts out, Hannibal answers one from Johns Hopkins. He answers their plea for him to come in, to help treat the wounded being brought in from the accident on the I-495—an accident that never should have been at all.

Incompetency is the only reason Hannibal can guess at for the pile-up, though he doesn’t have time to ask for specifics. There are too many people who need treatment, too many bleeding organs and broken limbs. Too many patients being split up and delegated—some to DC, and some of the more severe cases airlifted in to Baltimore where they boast an effective surgical staff.

Thirty-seven vehicles, he will hear later. Thirty-seven cars, trucks, and vans that piled up because a tractor-trailer swerved to avoid an *obstruction,* struck a concrete barricade, and spun out across both the outgoing and oncoming lanes of traffic. It flipped, killing the driver instantly, and spilling gasoline and engine oil across the Beltway.

He will hear later that at least one vehicle exploded.

There is no confirmed tally of the injured, or of the dead.

But in these first moments, he doesn’t know the details. He only knows that he has lives that need saving—and that Will does not answer when Hannibal tries to call him back.

There is an agitated energy that fills a hospital during an event such as this. He has witnessed it only several times before, but it masks his feelings now quite well. One snappish surgeon does not stand out when everyone is on edge, when there are more patients than there are staff, when there are more emergencies than they can suitably handle at once. Hannibal is aware of nurses being called in to help just as he was. There are close to seventy emergency patients, if not more, spread across the tristate area from this one incident alone.

And Hannibal does not know where Will is.

"Bernadette," he says as he leaves one patient's amphitheatre to wash briskly and prep for another. It's somewhere around lunch, though he's largely lost track of time. There are no windows in the operating rooms, and Hannibal has bounced from one to the next. As he has not yet had to declare a time of death for any of his patients, he remains figuratively in the dark.

She looks harried. Her powder blue scrubs are usually bright against her darker complexion, but today, she is smeared in stains of iodine and blood. This is her first large-scale emergency, and Hannibal knows it will not be her last. Already there is the shine of a veteran developing in her eyes. No matter what Hannibal is seeing today, his nurses are seeing far more of it. "Yeah, Doctor Lecter?"

"If…" Hannibal pauses in his washing and assembles his thoughts. His lips press into a thin line, then he starts again. "If Will Graham is admitted, I want to know as soon as I am available. If he requires medical attention, I want to be present. I understand you can't see everything on a day like this, but please keep me apprised of the situation."

Bernadette frowns, rustling through supplies for whatever it is she's looking for. "Yeah, I can keep an eye out, but…" She glances back toward the pandemonium behind them. "I mean, are you expecting him here?"

Hannibal's teeth click together. He forces a tight, tense smile that is probably more frightening than it puts her at ease, but he cannot find it in himself to be in good humor right now. "Will lives in Virginia. He called me from the scene of the accident, but his call cut out and I have not heard from him since."

Her expression twists into a grimace of dismay and sympathy. "Damn," she breathes. "Yeah, Doc, if he gets brought in I'll let you know."

Hannibal nods slightly. "Thank you." He washes the disinfectant from his arms and suits up for another round. "Next patient?"

She gestures toward the next operating room. "Prepped and waiting, pierced in the abdomen. Just got brought in about ninety seconds ago. You're the first one out, so you're up."

The crux of the situation is this: this was decidedly *not* what Hannibal planned. A standstill, yes—a body placed on a state line ensures FBI presence to sort out the jurisdictional war, and he would not have been surprised if traffic had been halted for hours while they assessed and cleared the scene. Will would have gotten caught up in the mess. That was what he *wanted.* He knows enough of Will to know his curious mind. He would have found the scene as Hannibal planned it, seen his work firsthand, and been able to develop a clearer understanding of Hannibal's intentions, and perhaps even surmised through this silent language of flesh and bone what Hannibal intends for *him.*

Somewhere between the moment when Hannibal left the body and the moment Will spoke of an accident is where the blur has occurred that has brought him to now.

Hannibal does not feel guilt over these interrupted lives, and too, the ones that have been lost. This accident is not unlike a church roof collapse: an act of violence punishing sinners, though faithful they may be. The only death Hannibal will claim as his own is the one that was wrought of his own hand. However, this changes things—this will change the public's perception of the Chesapeake Ripper. It will change Will's perception of his killer. And that, Hannibal finds, is so unacceptable that he'd like to stage another scene right now, force himself to be understood.

But to be understood, he needs Will to see him.

To be seen, he needs *Will.*

And he is not yet sure where Will *is.*

He passes from one perforated kidney and lacerated liver into the next operating room, with barely a break to choke down an organic protein bar and a bottle of water. "Anything?" he asks when Bernadette darts into the break room and chugs a power drink with such speed that Hannibal fears for her heart health.

"No, nothing," she replies. "I'll keep you in the loop. Good luck."

And so it goes. One more patient, two, three. By the time Hannibal realizes night has fallen, his hands have developed a tremor—and though he's sure there are more people who need treatment, in the end, he is the one who decides he's done as much as he can. He's sixteen hectic hours into what was supposed to be a twelve hour shift. He hasn't had a chance to eat anything of substance, and he's running on dwindling caffeine and sheer spite.

He cannot yet rest. He still has a mission to accomplish. If Will has not been brought to him, then Hannibal will go searching for him if he must.

But as he splashes water on his face in the break room and feels the impatient scrapings of the monster beneath his skin, he is interrupted by a familiar face. "Hey," Bernadette says, and gestures brusquely for him to follow. He thought she left hours ago, but he does as he is bid—follows her out of the break room, into the hall, through the corridors until he is in a familiar wing of the hospital.

Bernadette opens the door to Hannibal's office (which he is determinedly certain he locked) but before he can demand answers, he sees the source of her tenacity.

Hannibal feels a lead weight melt and drain away from his lungs; he can breathe much easier all of a sudden. The monster's pacing does not cease, but it slows. Will is seated at his office chair, and his head is pillowed on his bare arm atop Hannibal's desk. He's asleep.

"He wasn't admitted," Bernadette says softly, as not to wake Will. She looks at him with a sad and fond expression, wrapped up in her own exhaustion and the horror of what she's seen today. She's brought Hannibal to him, not only out of her own kindness, but because her soul demands attention to whatever shred of happiness and light it can find. She sees them as the source of that light, if only for now.

She has done something good. Perhaps there is hope for her.

"Actually, he refused to be admitted," she continues with a huff. "And he only showed up about an hour ago, anyway. He told me he'd wait, but honestly, I didn't have the heart to make him stay in the ER with everyone else. I hope that's okay."

“Better than okay.” Hannibal inhales and exhales, turns his eyes to Bernadette. “Thank you, truly.” He flashes a flicker of his own exhausted smile, but most of the peace within it comes from territorial satisfaction. Will is here. Whether or not Will is *safe* remains to be seen, but Hannibal has enough faith in his own abilities that he will *make* it so.

“Goodnight, Doctor Lecter,” Bernadette says.

Hannibal nods and lays his open palm on her shoulder, comforting and thankful all in one. He is fond of her, yes, but in his current detached state, it has no more meaning to him than patting a hunting dog who has served its master well. She has served him well tonight, and he is pleased with her performance. She will get along just fine here at Johns Hopkins—

—but she is not Will, and thus, she is not his priority.

“Goodnight, Bernadette,” Hannibal says, a kind dismissal, and steps into his office. He sees her go from the corner of his eye. The door clicks closed behind him.

Will does not stir.

Hannibal has never seen him so rumpled, swathed in sweatpants that slouch down over his boots and a baggy gray tee-shirt. His bag is spilled across the floor. Whether it toppled over, or Will simply dropped it that way, Hannibal cannot be certain. But prior to waking Will…

Hannibal crouches, inspects the careless collection of objects, and picks up a creased, plastic-jacketed checkbook. The upper left corner says *William S. Graham,* 9866 Faust Dr, Wolf Trap, VA.

Hannibal’s lips twitch. Oh, God does so love to entertain him; each cruelty comes part and parcel with a gift such as this. Hannibal is coming to believe that the cruelty imparted in taking Mischa from him may yet be replaced by the complex benediction that is Will Graham.

Hannibal checks the front page of the checkbook—it seems Will doesn’t keep a physical log, or if he does, it isn’t here. No record of which number he’s on. It’s just as well. Hannibal tears a single blank check from the book and folds it; he slips it through the seam of the lower desk drawer to survey later, knowing the drawer’s proximity to Will’s leg and the terrible metal screech would wake him if he were to open it properly. Instead, he packs Will’s belongings back into his messenger bag.

But there, crammed into the bottom of the satchel, is a mass of fabric tied off in a grocery bag. Hannibal frowns; through the thin plastic, he can tell whatever is encased is soaked with moisture. Hannibal picks apart the knot that holds it together—

—he is assaulted by the scent of blood and viscera, gasoline and oil, smoke and flame. Death. Inside Hannibal spies the blue of denim, the soft gray knit of a sweater. Rough canvas, hunter green. Will’s jacket, all but destroyed.

Anger flashes through Hannibal so strongly that he feels his heart lunge forth, a predator ready to strike. Will had gotten close. *Too* close. He had walked willingly into fire and—Hannibal inhales deeply—drudged himself in the blood of more than one person, some of it his own. Foolishly, *bravely* dedicated to helping. He looks up and notices that Will’s cast, cradled in his lap, is caked with a flaking brown patina of blood, not entirely scrubbed away. Hannibal’s rage condenses into a fine, bright point in his heart when he imagines what might have happened if Will had been standing too close when the vehicles exploded. If Hannibal had gone out to find him, searching for days because Will has no formal tie to him: no legal obligation, no one for a hospital to call in case of an emergency, no next of kin. The idea of Will Graham going into an unmarked grave because there’s no

one to claim him is *incensing.* A mind like Will's being lost to the cruelties and the whims of the ages…

Hannibal won't allow it.

He ties the bag closed again and replaces it in Will's satchel. His cleaner has been known to work miracles—perhaps with the proper chemicals and financial incentive, Will's belongings might be saved. Hannibal will be looking into it at the first available opportunity.

But for now, his curiosity has been piqued, and it growls to be fed. Today's brand of hell has been one of his own making, but he *must* know of Will's experience walking through it. Years of habit in medical fields demands he look Will over, search out his wounds, poke and prod at them to assess his condition thoroughly so that Hannibal might better dress them later.

Hannibal reaches for Will, lays his hand on Will's arm and gives him a gentle nudge. "Will," he says softly, coaxingly. "Can you hear me?"

Will's bicep twitches under Hannibal's palm. It is the only warning he gets before Will comes awake all at once, gasping for breath like a drowning man breaking above the water's surface. His eyes are wild, dark hollows in his sockets, fierce red lines where his face has been cut by crash debris. His hands come up before him, like he seeks to protect his body—purple and yellow, cut and bruised. *All* of Will that Hannibal can see is damaged in this way.

Will chokes for breath. His eyes do not focus, up until the moment that they do. Will's brilliant terror smooths with an expression Hannibal is not used to seeing directed toward him: ruinous relief.

"Hannibal," Will whispers. His hands snap out and Hannibal nearly puts him on his back in reflex, but—

—Will's arms encircle Hannibal's neck in a frantic embrace. He tips himself out of Hannibal's office chair and lands solidly in his lap. Hannibal winces; his body aches, and being sprawled across tile is far from ideal, but the discomfort ceases to matter at the moment Will tucks his face into the curve of Hannibal's throat and clings to him like a trembling babe.

It is the second time today Hannibal has found himself in an unexpected situation. however, as he has already proven once, he is adaptable. He scoops Will into his arms and hauls him close: victims of shock often find comfort in human contact if they are the first to welcome it. And holding him feels…

Will's warmth is pleasant. His weight, Hannibal thinks, *would* be if it weren't for the hospital floor beneath their bodies. There are no soft scents clinging to Will now—only the smell of disinfectant soap and the faintest tinges of iron and steel. But there is freedom now in being able to touch Will as he pleases, to splay his fingers wide and run his palms over the slim lines of Will's back, feel the way his trim and lovely body fits into the spaces made by Hannibal's own. And feeling him shake, feeling him cling, feeling his *need*—

"Breathe deeply, Will," Hannibal murmurs, and winds one hand into Will's hair to cradle his skull. "I'm here with you, and you are with me. You're safe."

Will is vibrating out of his skin, shaking so hard that Hannibal trembles with him by sheer exchange of force. "I can't," he whispers, "I couldn't. I *tried.* "

"I know. I know you did," Hannibal soothes. He holds Will until his own arms ache, and even then, he holds tighter yet. Holding Will like this reminds him of the way Mischa would attach herself to him in

search of comfort. Perhaps that's where the memory of how *to* comfort comes from. Hannibal has to believe that, since the alternative is that nurturing is his base instinct—or most concerning of all, a response that has developed specifically for Will.

Will's face is damp as he nuzzles frantically at Hannibal's throat, a desperate animal gesture that only eases when Hannibal guides Will to the crook of his neck. There's no disgust to be found for the wet drip of his tears. Instead, a bolt of electricity shoots down his spine when Will's breath hitches and his teeth graze Hannibal's skin.

This is the closest he has been to another person in… quite some time. And short of (or even *exceeding)* impersonal sexual encounters, surely the most intimate.

His fingers slide through Will's hair, carefully working the elastic out of the mass of his curls, letting it roll back over his knuckles and settle like a shackle around his wrist. Will clutches at his back hard enough to bruise. Hannibal selfishly hopes Will leaves marks that he can savor after this moment has passed, gaze upon in the mirror and map the topography of Will's need.

They sit like that for a while. Hannibal is content to wait until his aching muscles begin to stiffen, an object in motion finally coming to rest. Hannibal, too, needs to rest, just as much as Will requires peace and quiet.

"Do you have anyone I can call for you?" Hannibal asks, though he knows the answer is—

"No, I don't," Will says, and his hands curl into fists in the back of Hannibal's scrubs; the edge of his cast digs into Hannibal's spine. "I don't."

Hannibal tips his head to he side and rests his cheek atop the crown of Will's head. He breathes slowly, the faintest scent of Will's home lingering on him like it has permeated his person too far to be lost. "I feel I must insist you not be alone right now, mylimasis."

Will's fingers clench convulsively at the slip. It's as though Will's heart understands the word his brain does not. It is only once it escapes Hannibal's lips that he remembers that they are no longer in public, no longer supervised. He is no longer obligated to say such things.

It's fortunate, then, that this does not feel like an obligation.

Will's noses at Hannibal's throat like their proximity is still not enough to settle him. The clutch of his fingers, his insistent closeness—he seems nearly ready to claw Hannibal open and crawl inside, curl up in the cradle of his ribs, lock himself in the cage of Hannibal's attention and affection. Hannibal is ready to let him.

"Please don't send me away," Will whispers. "I know you're tired, you've been working all day, but just let me stay for a little while, Hannibal, please."

"I would prefer you to stay where I may look after you," he replies. Hannibal gently pushes Will back by the shoulders until Will's eyes meet his, a mess of makeup revealing the shape of him underneath. Until Hannibal can survey the frenetic worry on Will's face. Until he can smooth Will's bangs back from his forehead and watch the flutter of black lashes, the way Will presses his cheek into his palm. "Let me remove your cast. Then, if you'll allow me, I'll bring you to my home. Make you something to eat. We can sit and talk, or sit in silence if you prefer. Whatever it is that you need. I want to help you."

Will's fractures. Hannibal can see him crumbling within his responding agonized smile. It's a reflex, one meant to temper his edges and hide the true depth of his pain. Instead, Will only reveals it, peeling the teary-eyed cover back to expose the grinning horror inside. He has seen death today: the careless kind that has no rhyme or reason, that does not take the time to choose the guilty or act as an agent of justice.

Hannibal knows *that* is the weight sitting heavily upon Will now—but there was never anything he could do to stop this.

"You shouldn't," Will says. His smile flickers and breaks, and his eyes squeeze shut. Will rubs his fists against them, and when he lets his hands fall, they are smudged with salt and kohl. "I should have done more—"

"I feared you were dead," Hannibal says, perhaps more sharply than he should. He cups Will's cheeks in his palms and finds peace in the open, raw emotion he sees staring back. He smooths mascara tracks away from Will's cheeks with the pads of his thumbs. "I don't care about the lives you save, I care about *your* life. If the price of their mercy was your destruction, I would choose you."

Will stares at him like he is the sun—blindingly vibrant, and Will cannot hold his gaze for long. "You're biased," he murmurs. His voice cracks. His eyes fall to Hannibal's collar, but he knows Will can still clearly feel the weight of his regard. He buckles under it. The longer Hannibal stares, the more Will's eyes fill with unshed tears.

"I am." Hannibal's hands slide down until they curl around Will's neck and jaw, hold him steady with fond possession. "That doesn't make it less true."

Will's lip trembles. All the color has worn away, leaving only soft pink behind. It's the natural color of his mouth, and Hannibal longs to see it redden under the pressure of his teeth. When he finds out exactly what color that is, he'll buy Will a new pigment to ensure it never fades. He doesn't want any of this to fade, from Will's sweet and eager responses to being touched to his reliance on Hannibal's support. The best way to ensure it never ends is to ensure Will wants it even after he's gone.

Yes, the creature living inside his soul rather likes the thought of that.

"Come home with me," Hannibal prompts again. "Let me look after you. For my own peace of mind."

Will's eyes gleam, spill, overflow down his cheeks and drip from his chin. He hiccups, then nods. Nods, nods, nods. Helpless, melting into Hannibal's hands. His for the taking. His for the shaping.

"Yeah," Will says, and the monster in Hannibal's heart purrs. "Yeah. Yes. Please. Please."

Chapter End Notes

(aside: turns out Faust Drive is a real street in Wolf Trap that I found while digging for a potential address for Will in Google Maps. I know RL Wolf Trap is significantly more suburban

than what we saw in the show, and Will's house number is not any that occur on that road, but man, I got a good laugh out of it before I was like "yep, that's the one".)

rebloggable on tumblr

1:14

Chapter Notes

> My poor darling Will is having a rough day and making up for it by derailing my plans. Figures. CW for some blood and stuff.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Everything is blurring.

The hospital lights, the sirens; the procedure room, the ambulances; the smell of antiseptic, the smell of blood; the sight of Hannibal, Hannibal, Hannibal is *here.* Hannibal is here, and so is Will, though he's finding it harder and harder to remember that he's no longer drifting. He's safe. He is safe.

The cast cracks open, and it's the first real moment of clarity that Will has experienced. It comes from a piece of kibble falling out of the plaster and clattering on the floor. Will stares down at it. The rust-red smudges that have been trapped against his skin cease to matter. Instead, it's inexplicably funny that there is *dog food,* of all things, that has been stuck in his cast.

He laughs until there are tears streaming from his eyes, until Hannibal levels him with a look of grim concern and Will answers that *no,* it doesn't hurt much, and *yes* he can move his fingers just fine. It's winter, so fortunately the skin beneath the cast is not a terribly different color from the rest once Hannibal washes the blood away.

Hannibal sits him down and sits across from him, pats his arm dry with paper towels and gentle hands. The warmth of his palms feels nice, even if there's a subtle ache to Will's arm that hasn't quite faded. But it feels good to let it breathe, let it breathe, he can't—

"Breathe, Will," Hannibal murmurs, and his hand is on Will's shoulder, anchoring him, and the other feels for his pulse. "In and out, with me."

So Will does. He does as he's told, and maybe that's the easiest thing he's ever done, because he doesn't have to think about it. Hannibal is a doctor; he knows this sort of thing. He can be trusted.

"That's very good," he says. It hangs heavy around Will's neck like a medal, like a collar, like a noose. "Where's your car? How did you get here?"

The highway. Metal, fire, rubber, glass. Drifting across tarmac like the ferryman across Acheron, pulling bodies from vehicles, howling and trapped within eternal torment. It felt like every emergency vehicle in the tristate area converged on the wreck, pulling apart the mess of cars and trucks, the police and the FBI converging on the body, and Will ducked out and slipped away from Clarice. He retreated back to his car before anyone could stop him, and no one had the manpower to follow him given the magnitude of the accident that had occured.

It still took hours for traffic to start moving again. Will's not exactly sure what happened in that time, only that he found himself in the ER lobby, shaking and bloody and asking for Hannibal. Then a nurse had recognized him, and he remembered her, and she gave him a change of her clothes from her locker and a grocery bag for his things, and—

—and then he had woken up again and Hannibal was there, and everything seemed a little bit more okay after that.

“Drove,” Will says, and his voice falters. His hair is a mess in his eyes, feels suffocating around his neck and shoulders. “I think.” He pats at his leg and feels keys in his pocket. “Yeah, drove.”

Hannibal’s lips press into a thin, firm line. “I’m afraid I can’t let you get behind the wheel again, given your state of mind. Will you give me your keys?”

Will hands them over without argument. That, at least, draws a small smile from Hannibal. Will likes it. Wants to see it again. Wants to make Hannibal smile *more.* His approval feels like calm waters compared to Will’s capsizing ship of self. Not even Wilhelmina can keep him afloat when there’s still blood under his nails, showing through the cracks in the polish.

The splint goes on. It’s stiff but breathable, held on by velcro straps, less than half the size of the cast. Will immediately likes it much better, and likes it better yet when Hannibal says, “Hold my hands, I’ll help you up,” and Will can feel their fingers tangle. He exhales softly, slowly, and only wobbles a little when he’s pulled to his feet, though standing itself is painful beyond measure.

Hannibal carries his bag, won’t let Will take it, even when he grumbles. Will narrowly avoids making an argument for his case by telling Hannibal how exhausted he looks, but he figures he probably looks worse, and he doesn’t want to irritate the only person who’s endeared to him right now. And if he reaches for his bag, he’ll have to let go of Hannibal’s hand; he wants the contact more than he cares about his pride. He lets Hannibal carry it, and tries to mask his limping when Hannibal leads him toward the parking garage.

The exit from the heated hospital halls into the unheated garage is sobering; Will is more aware of where he is once they exit into the dimness, as the flickering lights paint the clouds of their breath gold. He shivers without his jacket to warm him. When Hannibal stops, Will is silent and watchful until the very moment he sets Will’s bag down and shrugs his coat from his shoulders to sweep it around Will’s.

Will makes a wordless, wounded sound. He feels helpless, gutted by the simple act of compassion. He can’t even find the words beyond his racing thoughts, or summon the presence of mind to try to give it back. He only knows that he is cold and the coat is heavy and warm and smells like Hannibal. Will’s knuckles go white when he clutches it close, feels his curls caught under the collar and can’t bring himself to care.

Something in Hannibal’s eyes is softer than Will remembers it being before. Will hates to think of what he must look like, wide-eyed and needing, *weak.* But Hannibal cups Will’s cheeks in his palms, doesn’t so much as twitch at the faint prickle of stubble—so far removed from Will’s usual self—and kisses his forehead.

No one’s around, it’s just them, but it doesn’t seem to matter to Hannibal that he has no one to impress, no obligation to fulfill, and Will is *not* about to complain. Hannibal radiates heat and smells like antiseptic, spice, and the faintest hint of sweat—human, he is human and he is alive and Will is a malleable substance in his hands.

“You break my heart, mylimasis,” Hannibal murmurs against his skin. His voice is a rumble, tangible, and Will shivers as though he’s still cold but he’s not, he’s *not.* “You look at me as though no one has ever done anything kind for you before.”

Will opens his mouth to reply and closes it again. He is too busy absorbing every molecule of this moment, saving it within the preserved sections of his mind. He inhales, and his nose brushes Hannibal's jaw. If his hands weren't busy holding on to Hannibal's coat, he might do something significantly more embarrassing.

"Where has that voice gone?" Hannibal asks, though he doesn't seem to expect an answer. He withdraws only enough to look Will in the face, to push his bangs out of his eyes with the backs of his knuckles so very gently. "Are you with me, Will?"

Will nods. He can hear Hannibal, yes. He just can't seem to find the words to reply. His jaw works silently. He's trying. He wants to, but everything seems to be falling apart. Hannibal is the only light, the only focus, and it's only when he kisses the crown of Will's head that he feels as though he can breathe.

"Alright," Hannibal says. "Come, now. Let's get you home." He strokes Will's hair, then takes both his hands and the gentleness, the soft consideration—Will swears he could call it love if he dreamt it hard enough, but even that seems too far out of reach, too sweet to let melt on his tongue. His heart is in his throat at the thought of *home* being with Hannibal. Maybe he's right, though; maybe it is.

Hannibal picks up the bag, and Will tucks himself into Hannibal's side; links their arms together, inseparably twined like summer vines as they search out the Bentley in the dark.

Hannibal opens the passenger door for him, then puts Will's bag in the backseat. He slides behind the wheel with grace and ease, and cranks the heat until Will is melting—head tipped toward him on the passenger seat, limbs leaden and lazy. His eyes are half-lidded, blurry around the edges; Will hopes his glasses are in his bag, but he has no way of being sure. He can survive without them if he has to, he supposes. But here, in this warm, safe space, he has no need to be aware of anything but Hannibal.

"Rest, Will." Hannibal reaches over and lays his hand atop Will's, squeezes it for one long, fond moment. "I'll wake you when we arrive."

Will finds his words at long last, though they arrive with the lingering horror that if he goes to sleep, he might wake up somewhere else. Somewhere significantly less pleasant. Somewhere that *he* is, and Hannibal is *not.* "Not gonna drop me off an overpass, are you?"

It's meant to be a joke. But when Will says it, his voice breaks, and Hannibal looks over sharply like so many schoolteachers and guidance counsellors that looked at Will sideways when he made one self-deprecating joke too many. "Do you take me for the sort of person who would do that to you?"

It's said with an edge that sounds like hurt. It hurts Will right back that he might be the cause, but the sight of one strong hand on the wheel of the car makes him stop before he backtracks. The knowledge that Hannibal has seen life and death a hundred times over floats restlessly in his brain.

What kind of person would be capable of The Hanged Man's murder?

His face was removed. The lines had been clean, the skin expertly flayed and excised. It all seems so clear in retrospect: the Ripper has medical knowledge. A mortician, a veterinarian, a surgeon, an army medic—all people of good standing. Trustworthy members of the community.

Will closes his eyes. He rolls his hand in Hannibal's grip, feels the twitch of his fingers when Will doesn't pull away, but tangles them together. The splint is so much lighter, so much more comfortable; he can feel Hannibal's palm against his, and it's as comforting as an embrace.

“I think you’re probably capable of a lot. More than most people.” He doesn’t open his eyes, but he knows Hannibal means to protest—but the truth of all Will has seen forces its way out through his mouth before he can bite it back.

The Hanged Man’s body had been the sole pillar of sense in a field of chaos. When Will looked up, everything there had meaning. Everything below was random, unpredictable, unknowable.

There’s comfort in precision. He has faith that, good or bad, Hannibal will do nothing more or less with Will than exactly what he intends.

As for what Will intends for Hannibal… he’s not yet sure. He only knows this moment and the stability it brings. He doesn’t want to think too much about what it means.

“I’m probably capable too, under the right circumstances,” Will says softly. “But I couldn’t do that to you, so I don’t think you’d do it to me.”

Hannibal huffs a breath. Will cracks his eyes open to stare at Hannibal through his lashes and his frizzy bangs and sees the hints of a smile on his lips. Will squeezes his hand again, and Hannibal squeezes back. “No, I don’t believe I could.”

His eyes are heavy. This feels like a moment he doesn’t want to let slip away, but he’s undoubtedly sliding backward down this slope. Hannibal is his tether to reality, but the warmth of his touch feels like permission to let himself go. To trust.

“Tell me I’ll be okay,” Will whispers. “That if I fall asleep, you won’t let me disappear. That no matter what I see in my dreams, I’ll be here with you.”

Hannibal looks away from the road. For a moment, there is only them, only the hum of wheels beneath their bodies, the motions of the car. Lights from a passing vehicle illuminate Hannibal’s eyes, make them glow like rubies, dripping with affection like a bleeding heart. “You are safe with me, Will. I promise.”

Will holds his gaze until his lids fall closed, until the sounds of the engine and Hannibal’s breathing pulls him under. And, faintly, the sound of radio static and violins. It’s a symphony of sound that sings Will to sleep.

He trusts.

It is dark.

Will sits by himself, suspended in the black, knowing he is upright, knowing he is lost and he is alone, and—

—there is blood beneath his feet. The world smells of metal and decay. He is so warm that he wishes he were cold. The dark is closing in and he is drowning, he is dying, and there is no escape, his body hurts, everything is sharp, and the blood is *his*.

“Pay attention.”

Everything else disappears but her.

She is him, but she is not him. She shares his face, but idealized—she looks the way he sometimes imagines he would look if he were in a movie, with everything just a little bit prettier, every piece of his body just a little smoother. There are pieces of her that remind him of Margot. Her smoky eyes, her highlighted cheeks, her shapely lips, her glossy curls. She bears the soft swell of breasts and hips that Will sometimes envies but sometimes doesn't, caught between the two sides of himself, neither able to agree on which he is.

He knows her. She has always been with him.

"Pay attention," she says, but her mouth doesn't move. She leans forward, elbows on her knees, and the shins of her jeans are cut up and soaked in blood. When he looks down, his wounds are the same. When he looks up again, there are cuts on her face, on her hands, the same as him.

"To what?" Will asks. He's not sure if his voice comes out at all or if he only thinks it, but she understands. He knows she does.

"We know him. He knows us. He's coming," she says. Her lips part. Inside her mouth, she has fangs. She smiles. "Pay attention."

Will's heart speeds, beating like a bird's wings in his throat. He knows who she means. He knows better than to ask sense of a dream, but he must. He must. "How much time do I have?"

She stands. Her manicured fingers twist and crack and grow claws, smooth and sharp as false nails. She is a creature, a wolf wearing human skin. Her lashes are thick and black around her eyes; her pupils are slitted, glowing red.

She is Will, idealized.

Wilhelmina lunges. Her teeth sink into Will's throat with the sweetness of a lover and the vicious force of a killer. Her hands brush gently over his skin, echoing all the places Hannibal touched. Her claws find Will's hairline and begin to cut, to peel his face away and expose the skull beneath.

"None."

"Will?"

Will howls, screams, but does not die. As she cuts him away, a creature springs forth from beneath his flesh—pitch-black limbs splitting through his skin, antlers ripping through his scalp, his curls wild and free around him like a mane. She is a wolf but he is a stag, and she has no pack, no safety, and they are an even match. He drops his head and snaps upward, goring her through the chest, her pretty blouse and tender breasts ripping apart like tissue paper, blinding him with arterial spray, but she *laughs,* and Will *laughs,* and they are two halves of the same terrible thing, triumphant—

"Will, can you hear me?"

Wilhelmina stares into his eyes. Blood drips from her mouth and paints her lips red. She ducks her chin and kisses his forehead, and he can feel her teeth against his newly-grown skin.

When she whispers, it's with a different voice, neither his nor hers, but familiar all the same. It is her face, her mouth, but Hannibal's eyes stare out of her skull.

His voice.

“Pay attention, Will.”

Will snaps to awareness at once, knowing he is somewhere dark but unfamiliar, a blur of sleep and fear linger heavily at the back of his mind. It’s the only observation he makes before he realizes there are hands on him, and he lashes out in a wild flux of instinct.

One hand finds a throat, closes around it. His fingers protest, ache, and Will realize that if he is threatened, he may very well die here since he’s attacked with his broken arm—

—he meets his attacker’s eyes, and there is no light within them. No panic. No concern. Just the flat assessment of a predator considering the merits of fighting back against prey, knowing how fully and thoroughly they will win.

“Will,” Hannibal says, and the vibration of his vocal cords shakes Will’s fragile bones. “Please release me. I’ll only ask once.”

Will relents, and the dream fades. He withdraws in an instant. He pushes himself with his feet and aching legs until his back meets the passenger door of the Bentley, creating as much space between his body and Hannibal’s as he can. Horror wells at the back of his tongue, thick and acrid, and he covers his face with his hands.

“I’m sorry,” Will whispers, and guilt chokes him. What was he about to do? What the fuck is wrong with him? “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to. Jesus. I’m sorry.”

Hannibal inhales and exhales audibly. His breath is steady, alive, *living,* no thanks to Will. “No,” Hannibal says, and Will’s heart lurches. This is it. He’s fucked it up. “No, don’t be sorry. I should have been more thoughtful. I didn’t mean to frighten you.”

Is he always so fucking reasonable? If it’s even possible, that makes Will feel *worse.*

“Will, I’m going to get out of the car now. I’m going to come around to your side and help you out. Do you understand?”

Will wants to sob. He nods, brisk and shaky, and jumps at the sound of the car door closing, then flails when the door opens behind him and his body is assaulted by cold air. He’s blurring. But Hannibal’s hands on him are solid.

“There,” he says, and one hand splays across Will’s back, steadies him as he unbuckles Will’s seatbelt. There’s a palm on his outer thigh that tugs at him, turns his body manually until Will is facing Hannibal. He’s too guilty, too ashamed to meet his eyes, so Will stares at his throat like he can see bruises forming, despite knowing he was not nearly strong enough to cause that sort of damage. But logic has no place in his mind now—only fear.

“Don’t be afraid, Will,” Hannibal says. He reaches out to touch his cheek, and Will shivers. Swallows. “What did I tell you before you fell asleep?”

Will thinks. His eyes squeeze shut. “That I’m safe with you.”

“And you are, aren’t you?”

Hannibal's hand falls to Will's shoulder, rubs at the juncture of his neck, and Will slumps into that sensation. Rests his cheek against Hannibal's wrist. "Yeah."

Will heaves a heavy sigh, feels himself tremble down to his bones, and he can't entirely help it when he noses at Hannibal's pulse. He feels base. He feels animal. He feels like Winston, begging for pats, and it's so damn *pathetic—*

It's like Hannibal reads his mind. He strokes Will's bangs back from his face, touches his cheeks. Will moans softly, helplessly at how nice it feels. How good it is to be taken care of. It's so unfamiliar but so welcome that he could cry.

He doesn't want to cry. He just wants to be close.

"We're at my home," Hannibal says, and Will forces himself to focus. To open his eyes and look beyond Hannibal, to take in the sight of the driveway and the yard beyond. The freestanding brownstone home looming above them. Hannibal's eyes scan Will's face, linger until Will meets them. Whatever it is that he sees, it gives him pause. "Will, if you'd like me to drive you to your house, I can—"

"No, please," Will replies. No, he can't be alone. He can't. The dreams will make a monster out of the kind person that he knows, and he needs reality to ground him. He needs Hannibal near. "Please."

Hannibal *tsks* quietly, tilts his head and surveys Will. "You know I always welcome your company. I have no desire to send you away, I only want to be sure that you're comfortable."

"No, I want to be with you." Will wants to scream as soon as he says it, can't believe he's said something so damningly *desperate.* Hopes that Hannibal doesn't think he's immature, too young, too needy, decides to call this whole thing quits while he's ahead. Will wouldn't even blame him for it. It's no secret that he's a headcase. That was the *first* thing Hannibal learned about him.

But Hannibal smiles. There are faint lines around his eyes, and he bares his teeth in a wolfish grin. He looks pleased. Relieved. "Alright, then," he murmurs. "Then let's get you out of there and inside where it's warm."

Will's eyes widen. There's no sign at all that Hannibal is bothered, but his arms are bare and his only protection from the brisk November night is the thin cotton of his scrubs. "You should have said," Will protests, hisses as his untamed hair catches on the headrest and pulls free, leans forward to stagger to his feet, but once he has, he stumbles. His shins are *screaming* with pain that had faded from his mind, and he whimpers at the stretch of skin. It's too dark to know whether he's bled through the sweatpants. There may yet be glass grit in his legs, though he'd done his best to wash them when he changed.

Damn it.

Hannibal steadies him with a concerned glance and a hand on Will's arm, pulling away for only a moment to retrieve both his go-bag and Will's satchel from the backseat. The car beeps as it locks, and Hannibal returns to place his hand on Will's spine. "Are you well?"

Will shrugs for lack of a better option. His teeth are unwittingly bared, face twisted with pain he had hoped to hide. "I, uh, cut my legs up pretty badly earlier."

Hannibal's frown deepens as he leads Will to the door slowly, one step at a time. His expression darkens when Will gasps with the sting. "Why did you not allow yourself to be treated?"

Each step up to the door is agony. “Can’t,” he stammers through gritted teeth and faded, cracked lips, “Can’t let anyone know I was there. No records.”

Hannibal unlocks the front door, holds it open for Will with one hand, holds Will’s hand with his other. “I’m assuming you have a good reason for that, so why did you not tell me when we were at the hospital? I could have tended you then.”

“Didn’t think of it—!” Will barks out a sharp, pained laugh as he crosses the threshold, as the door closes behind them and the lights go on, as he has only a moment to take in the *fucking grand foyer* before the world spins, and—“Oh, holy shit, Hannibal, *what—”*

Will’s arms loop around his neck in desperate reflex as Hannibal scoops him into his arms, hands scrabbling for purchase against his clothing. His stomach lurches with surprise and his toes curl inside his boots in a fruitless search for level ground; his body tries to make sense of being airborne, on being completely reliant on someone else who is just as goddamn tired as he is.

“You’re going to aggravate your wounds by walking before they’re treated,” Hannibal replies, and to his credit, sounds only slightly inconvenienced by Will’s weight. Oh god, he’s so close like this, and Will can barely even process the flattering indignity of being *princess-carried* before they’re in motion.

He’s still wearing Hannibal’s coat. He’s in someone else’s sweatpants. His hair is a damn mess from being touched and from the absolute hell of Will’s day, caught between their bodies and tugging with each step. His cheeks are starting to grow prickly with day-end stubble, most of his makeup has faded, and he’s sure what little of it remains is probably supposedly-waterproof mascara that has smudged a thousand times over and given him racoon eyes. There’s only so many times someone can sweat and cry in a day that even the most dedicated of all-day-wear formulas can endure.

And despite all of this, Hannibal smiles indulgently at Will’s shell-shocked expression. He hitches Will up and Will scrambles to hold on and tries not to claw him too badly as he’s carried up the staircase.

“I could have made it,” Will replies. He decides firmly on being mortified at being manhandled, rather than allow any of the other more complicated emotions to arise.

“Yes, I’m sure you could have, you terribly stubborn thing,” Hannibal replies with a self-satisfied twist of his lips.

Will wants to smack him for it. He also wants to run his fingers through Hannibal’s hair. He certainly can’t have both, so he’ll settle for neither, and rests his face against Hannibal’s shoulder. He feels like a child, and yet Hannibal’s careful treatment of him makes him feel… *important.* Special.

“Don’t drop me,” he murmurs, and his arms tighten around Hannibal’s neck.

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

Hannibal carries him into a dark room, flipping the switch with a casual bump of his elbow. The walls and ceilings vault high above their heads, painted a rich and soothing blue. The lamps shine brightly, all of them similar, but not entirely the same. There is artwork hung on the walls too far away for Will to see, and a bed that is entirely too large to go unnoticed.

Will’s heart beats in his throat, and he makes a small, meek sound at the sight of the ornate mirror mounted across from the mattress. He covers it with by clearing his throat—or tries to. He’s not sure

he succeeds, so he aims for an air of arch indifference instead. “Get a lot of practice carrying your girlfriends into your bedroom?”

Hannibal glances at him, eyes lit with curiosity and amusement as he heads toward the master bathroom. “I don’t make a habit of carrying people over thresholds, female or otherwise. You would be the first, my dear—and, I imagine, the last.”

So much for indifference. Will balks. Hannibal’s smile widens.

“And, of course, I only purchased this house last year, and have maintained hectic hours ever since. You’re among the first to gain entry through the front door, and certainly unrivaled here.”

Embarrassment flares like a fire beneath his skin. Try as he might to purse his lips and ignore it, the heat in his cheeks is too much to handle. Will tucks his face against Hannibal’s neck with every intent of hiding until the moment passes. It’s truly too bad that he feels Hannibal’s chuckle reverberate from his ribs through Will’s own; no matter if or when he surfaces, Hannibal is aware he’s won and that Will’s petty challenge was met, matched, and conquered.

Will swallows hard, and they cross another threshold. The bathroom is opulent: a ceramic sink set into a marble countertop with not a personal item in sight, towels layered over one another in different colors that give the impression of a hotel room, a walk-in shower easily large enough for two, and a tub inlaid to a platform that is of a size for a grown man to easily submerge himself. It’s there that Hannibal sets him down, on the edge of where porcelain meets tile.

Letting Hannibal go is an exercise in restraint when all Will wants to do is hold on. He forces a weak smile when Hannibal draws back, crouching at his side with his hand resting on Will’s thigh. Will can feel the warmth of him through the fabric like a claim, like a brand.

“I’ll have to go downstairs to retrieve my medical kit,” Hannibal says. “Will you be okay here for a moment by yourself?”

Hannibal’s thumb makes slow, soothing circles, and Will can focus on nothing else. He bites the inside of his cheek; if he shows how it’s affecting him, Hannibal may tease him for it—or worse, stop. He forces himself to nod. He can handle being alone for a few minutes.

And Hannibal stares. Stares, like he’s trying to figure out if Will is being honest, like Will’s not ready to fall apart under such a simple goddamn touch. Like Will is a mystery to be puzzled out, so much more complicated than he feels right now, instead of a kid who’s damn near ready to break open on marble tile, the not-so-pretty pieces of him laid bare for Hannibal to see.

He glances down at Will’s legs, eyes lingering on where his hand rests, and Will tries not to shuffle. When Hannibal speaks, it sounds like an apology. “It’ll be easier to treat your abrasions if I can see them properly. Normally, I’d offer you a medical gown, but in this case, a towel may have to do. I can put your sweatpants in the wash while I’m downstairs, if you’d like.”

Will’s flush spreads to the tips of his ears. “They’re not mine,” he replies. Hannibal blinks, and his eyes narrow just slightly in consideration, so Will continues, “The nurse gave them to me. Bernadette. My clothes are in my bag, and I don’t. I don’t know if they’ll get clean, so you can—” Will’s breath catches in his throat at the thought of his father’s jacket, inevitably ruined. The words feel like swallowing glass, despair and sorrow coiling around his heart. “You can throw them out.”

Hannibal’s expression flickers; his frown deepens. “I’m sure that’s not necessary. I know an exceptional cleaner. If the stains won’t come out in the wash, we’ll see if they can’t be restored

professionally."

The words hit him first. The understanding of the implications follow.

He sees Hannibal blink, then again with shock, and then his figure blurs entirely. Will's vision swims. The simple kindness overwhelms him. He doesn't deserve this. He doesn't deserve Hannibal. But he nods, because he's selfish. The tears drip from his lashes, down his cheeks, and Will tries his best to smile but it comes out twisted. He laughs, and it's a sob.

"Thank you," Will says, swipes at his eyes and feels deeply embarrassed by his own vulnerability, but —

—Hannibal is there. He sits beside Will in an instant, lifts Will's legs up and over his lap so their bodies are angled together, and wraps Will in his arms. Long fingers slide into Will's hair, curl into a strong and steady grip; and Will moans and hiccups all in one, grounded by the touch and grateful for it. He wants to lean his head back into Hannibal's palm, press forward against Hannibal's shoulder. The anxiety of wanting and needing both makes him temporarily frantic until Hannibal guides Will's face to the curve of his neck, to the collar of his scrubs that has not yet dried from Will's first crying fit in the hospital.

Fuck, he's a mess. An absolute mess. His ship of self is capsizing, but Hannibal is his lighthouse, his beacon, his lifeline, his safe port—the only thing standing between Will drowning and a successful voyage home.

Hannibal shushes him, touches him, rubs his back and cocoons him in warmth, and Will's fractured heart breaks open in his hands. There will be no coming back from this. There will be no undoing this. No one else will be able to emulate or replicate this moment, and Will knows he'll accept no substitute.

No, this is it. This is his, and he needs it desperately.

"It's alright," Hannibal murmurs into his hair. "It's alright, darling. Stay with me, Will."

Will clings. Squeezes his eyes shut, feels his heart clench, and something clicks into place. He kisses the side of Hannibal's throat with his trembling mouth and tucks his face against Hannibal's shoulder when he feels him freeze.

It feels like the fealty of a warrior riding off to battle, the empty assurances of a reporter headed into an active war zone. It feels like the beginning of devotion and the beginning of goodbye. It feels like Will is a fucking idiot for ever thinking this could be simple. It's not, and it never will be. But if his dreams hold any weight, if he's going to die bloody by the Ripper's hand, Will wants to have Hannibal near for as long as he can. He's sure of it now.

Will's glad his face is hidden when the cold reality sinks in. If Hannibal could see him, he'd surely know the moment Will's voice catches on the lie. For now, he hoards every piece of affection he can in preparation for when it's gone: the weight of Hannibal's arms, the scent of his skin. "Where else would I go?"

How much time do I have?

None.

It was no mistake that The Hanged Man was left on his commute. For all Will's precautions, he should have known better. He always knew the Ripper was a genius, but some naive part of him never expected to be found.

It was a message: Will has seen and been seen.

The Ripper knows who he is.

He's coming.

Chapter End Notes

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1:15

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay, my dears. Life has been wild, but hopefully this chapter will make up for it. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It takes some time for Will to calm, though Hannibal spares no thought for the length of the process. What matters more is Will's reliance on him, his proximity, his need. By the time his quiet tears mellow into sniffles, Will is exhausted—wrapped in Hannibal's embrace, legs draped across his lap, anchored by his body and nosing at his throat. He is sweet-natured and gentle, the rough edges of him broken off and sanded down.

He is Hannibal's to sculpt, to mold. All it took was tragedy and kindness in equal measures.

In that regard, Hannibal has to take pride in what he has done today, despite its departure from his intended display. It has brought Will to this point, and Hannibal with him. From here, there is only forward to move. There is no turning back—and even if it were possible, Hannibal would not wish it so.

Already, he can sense their dynamic shifting. Will has stared at him with wounded reverence, worshipful hands, Joan of Arc ascending from flame among angels, honored in Heaven for her suffering upon Earth. And what a warrior Will is: emerging from a battle he needn't have fought, but did for the good of the many. Saving lives simply because he was called to do it by the selfless demands of his heart.

What a shame for him that Hannibal is a terribly selfish man.

Will's trembling fingers clutch at Hannibal's neck and shoulders, a silent beg to own and love. Whether or not Will knows it for himself, he treats Hannibal like someone he wants to keep near. His tears have stopped, and he holds himself insistently close. Hannibal is more than willing to indulge him. In fact, indulging Will is a joy and a pleasure of its own.

But letting Will have his way is only going to hurt him, and quite literally so. Hannibal smooths his hands down Will's spine; they curl around his slender hip bones, and he hides a smile when he feels Will flex into the grip, testing. Feeling. Huffing out a little sound against Hannibal's neck, breathy and wanting. Hannibal denies him because he must, though it's certainly no want of his own. "As reluctant as I am to leave you, I'm more reluctant to leave your wounds untended, mylimasis."

Will nods, silent but accepting. His lips brush the underside of Hannibal's jaw in a smooth path, over and back again. It's a delight and indulgence both for Hannibal to allow it, and he does allow it. Enjoys it. Convinces himself that allowing Will to grow attached is advantageous, and that *his* growing attachment is of no concern.

But then Will asks, "What does it mean? That name you call me?"

And Hannibal thinks of lying, but he doesn't. "Nothing so unlike what I call you in English, I suppose. Dear one, darling."

He does not mention the most direct translation: *my beloved.* It seems too much to speak aloud. He has no wish to overwhelm Will when the imprecise is already damning enough, and when the precise is not… it's simply not. Not *yet.*

But it *could* be, and the possibility is enough to make it worrisome, and enough to let it slip between his teeth.

And Will sighs, like the words are a net of spun gold instead of a fence of barbed wire. He rests his temple against Hannibal's shoulder, and his forehead in the crook of his neck, and says, "I like the way it sounds."

Hannibal does not say *I like the way it feels,* but he thinks it. Perhaps that is enough. Perhaps it is too much. But that, at least, is true. "I find myself called back to my mother tongue from time to time, though I use it much less now than I used to. There is no reason to use it in conversation anymore now that my family is gone."

Will nuzzles at his throat, nods simply. "Where are you from?"

"Lithuania," Hannibal answers. The memories flicker before his eyes—the forests, the acreage, the stone walls of his parents' castle estate, echoed in images both pristine and falling to ruin. Blonde hair, amber eyes; milk teeth at the bottom of a stone bowl. He chases the scent of blood and grown men's screams from his mind by replacing them with the scent of Will, the sound of his voice. "But many years ago. I am more apt to consider Paris my home, or Florence. Baltimore, too. I know all of them better than I remember that place."

"I know what you mean," Will replies. He's silent for a moment before he continues, "When I think of where I'm from, I think of New Orleans, even though I know there were a bunch of cities before that. I guess Wolf Trap is the closest runner-up I've got."

Hannibal rubs his back. Getting Will to speak is an improvement. The more he speaks now, the easier it will be later. "Have you never left the country?"

Will shakes his head. Hannibal thinks it a terrible shame. He thinks of how lovely Will would appear among the masterpieces in the Uffizi, the Louvre. He is a beauty worthy of Botticelli's *Venus,* curls untamed, utterly exposed by his very nature. Though he has been successfully shielded by Hannibal's coat, Will is no less bare in his raw emotion, his honesty.

Perhaps they will have the chance in the future, once Will overcomes his resistance to being cared for. Hannibal thinks he would rather like to be the one to expose Will to culture, to finery and refinement. If Will ends up enjoying Europe so much that he has no wish to return, well, Hannibal always imagined he might live there again someday. He can think of far less pleasant things than wandering the canals with Will at his side for the remainder of his life.

In truth, he can imagine few things *more* pleasant than that.

"Perhaps someday you will," Hannibal replies. "Though if that's to come to pass, you'll certainly need use of your legs." Pulling away from Will is a superhuman effort, though he allows Hannibal to go obligingly enough. It is only once Hannibal is standing and staring down at Will that he sees the idolatry in the depths of his eyes—reflecting his own.

It's a complication. It should be unacceptable. Hannibal is allowing himself to be compromised by a pretty face and a sharp mind. And even still, he kisses Will's forehead as he makes to leave and says, "I'll return momentarily." He tells himself it is a comfort to Will, but Will's nod is already accepting and without doubt. He already knows that Hannibal will return without being reassured of such.

It seems the need to reassure comes not from Will's desire for it, but rather from Hannibal's desire to *give* it. Though not to just anyone—even inside the confines of his mind, Hannibal cannot abide the thought of treating anyone else like he treats Will.

"Okay," Will says. "Let me just. Um." His cheeks flush a lovely shade of pink, counterpoint to the red and raw slices on his jaw and forehead. Will ducks his head, and his curls roll forward with the movement. He clutches Hannibal's fine wool coat like a safety blanket up until the moment he pulls it off and lays it lovingly at his side.

Will's teeth sink into his lower lip as he hooks his thumbs into the waistband of the sweatpants. He pushes them over the curve of his hip bones before he has to adjust his weight—one is slender and pale enough to glow in the dim light. The other hip is mottled with scrapes and bruises.

Hannibal cannot decide which is more beautiful.

His fingers flex into a fist at his side. He forces himself to relax just as swiftly. "Do you want my help?"

Will swallows, audible in the quiet room. "I'm embarrassed as hell, so no, I don't want your help. But I need it. Please."

Better leverage assures less pain for Will. He'll be at a better angle not to hurt him if he's on a similar axis. Hannibal nudges Will's legs apart with his knuckles and sinks to his knees between them, and Will looks gutted. Sweetly so—wide eyes and parted lips, the pink stain clinging stubbornly to the apples of his cheeks. Hannibal endeavors to keep his touch as professional as possible, no matter the lingering desire to feel Will tremble under his hands, though he does so without Hannibal having to try.

Hannibal's fingers brush Will's as they curl around the waistband, the backs of his knuckles dragging down Will's hips and soft thighs. He pauses only for Will to lift his hips with a sound that is distinctly pained, a wince and tiny hiss that escapes between Will's teeth. Bernadette's sweatpants peel back and Will's body is exposed, from the abrasions on his shins to the swath of blue lace that causes Hannibal's mind to fall strangely, eerily silent.

The panties do little for the sake of modesty (and, Hannibal suspects, for comfort), but the aesthetic is beyond lovely. The color contrast of rich pigment against Will's skin is striking. The bruises the lace covers on the other side are more so. Will's body is a painting in shades of ivory and blue, purple and red; he is a classic, stunning silhouette, entirely for Hannibal's perusal. For a moment, Hannibal considers leaning in, pressing his mouth to the bleed of purple, laying his own mark on this beautifully prepared canvas—but Will makes a soft, distressed sound at Hannibal's rapt attention, and so he turns his focus elsewhere, to the pool of age-worn gray cotton that is snared around Will's boots.

The afterimage lingers in his mind.

Hannibal holds one heel in his hand and unzips the leather with the other. Weeks ago, this was how their journey had begun. He could not have anticipated Will's importance at the time, or the things he would make Hannibal want.

Hannibal keeps his eyes on his task. There is blood that has dripped down inside the leg of Will's boot. Hannibal is unsure if it belongs to Will or to someone else entirely. There is sparse hair there, currently unshaven, but that speaks of a history of routine shaving or waxing. Hannibal removes the shoe, and one damp sock follows; he smears a drop of blood away with the pad of his thumb. "You don't have to be embarrassed with me, Will. I prefer you speak your mind. If you're uncomfortable, tell me so I may address the source."

"The source is myself," Will replies quietly, haltingly. "So there's not much you can do about that."

Hannibal switches to the other boot. "Are you uncomfortable with your body?"

Will's bare foot twitches against Hannibal's side, like he's considering whether or not to kick. Hannibal masks a smirk; hidden under the layers of Will's vulnerability, there's a fighter trapped beneath his skin. Perhaps the abrasions from the accident are cutting him free.

"No. But being mostly-naked in front of strange men isn't exactly normal for me, either."

The jibe hits home, but not in the way that Will expects. The split-second thought of Will like this before anyone else is grating. Hannibal's conscience is soothed knowing he's the only one. He looks up at Will as the other shoe hits the floor, as he pulls the pants and remaining sock free; it leaves Will bare but for the ill-fitting shirt and his lace underwear. "Do you still consider us strangers?"

Will stares at him. Hannibal imagines the picture he must make—he's certainly disheveled, exhausted, clad in scrubs instead of formalwear, and far fallen from the poised persona he shows to the world. It is not just anyone Hannibal will allow to see him kneel, let alone in blatant supplication, weary reverence. If it were going to be someone, though, of course it would be Will. In turn, he can't imagine Will allowing himself to be reliant on Hannibal's care and not feel the strings of fate tying them together. At least they are equally compromised.

They are nearing their event horizon. Perhaps they've already reached it.

The backs of Will's calves settle in his palms. Hannibal traces slowly downward from knees to ankles. He absently kneads at one Achilles tendon while he waits for Will's answer; he's vindicated at the flutter of Will's lashes, the involuntary curl of his toes.

"No," Will says, softly reluctant like Hannibal has forced it from his diaphragm. "I don't. You're, um. You're probably the only person who really understands me."

Hannibal pauses. The admission is unexpected. Pleasant. He must test it. "You have friends."

Will's ducked head evolves into hunched shoulders, drained and defensive. It only brings him closer to Hannibal, though he stubbornly avoids eye contact. "They know me. I know they care about me. But you… you *get* me. You give me everything I need. You don't even have to ask what it is."

At his side, Will's injured hand fists in Hannibal's coat. Hannibal frowns, then reaches up to gently pry Will's fingers from it, to tangle them with his own. Will looks at them, and then at him. He presses his lips together. They tremble. And then he laughs in a burst of wretched sound. He bends at the waist and their foreheads touch. Will's curls brush his cheeks, and Hannibal can feel the softness of his breath. It's strange. Intimate. Like this, Will takes up the full scope of his vision—but in this place of no importance and this moment of life changing significance, Will has always been the only thing worth looking at.

“See?” Will asks, and squeezes Hannibal’s hand with weak fingers, that same faltering grip that had closed around his throat not long before. It is testament to Hannibal’s fondness for him that Will is still alive right now. Their joined hands are pinned between their bodies, but Will holds as tight as he can; it would be so easy to break his grip, but Hannibal does not. Instead, he reciprocates.

“I see you clearly,” Hannibal replies, and Will meets his eyes at last. It feels like a victory. “Your ache, your loneliness. You don’t have to be alone if you don’t want to be. You said yourself there’s little difference between pretending and true feeling. I know the lines have blurred for me—and I know that fact is no secret to you. I don’t enjoy your suffering, Will. I can help you, if you ask me to.”

Despite their closeness, Hannibal cannot feel Will’s warmth; his skin is chilled, body stripped down by Hannibal’s design, broken and bleeding in more way than one. And yet his eyes hold such affection, such trust. Hannibal knows that now is the moment. This is when Will must decide their path forward, and he must choose it himself. Hannibal would rather not do this now, or *here,* but the moment has undeniably presented itself. They must see it through to the end.

Will closes his eyes. He noses at Hannibal’s temple, rests his face there and sighs with what sounds like longing. His lashes are wet, stuck together; there are dark rings under his eyes, smudged and faded mascara. “We’re so different.”

Agreement and dark amusement settle in Hannibal’s chest. It’s smothered by something else entirely, something unfamiliar, but undeniably fond. “In some ways, yes. In others, I think us remarkably similar.”

Will takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. Rubs his cheek against Hannibal’s hair. In this state, he is reduced to base instinct, an animal seeking comfort, reassurance. Hannibal wants to give it to him, so he does.

He reaches up with his free hand, slips around the nape of Will’s neck and gently squeezes. It’s a primal gesture—one for mothers protecting their cubs, for a predator claiming their mate.

Will’s eyes fly open, vulnerable and startled. The tremulous whine that bursts from his chest is damning for them both.

The first time they kissed had been ill-fated flirtation.

This is something else.

Desire calls them together; their mouths meet in the middle. Kissing Will is a new kind of consumption, feeding Hannibal’s desire in a way he is keen to explore. It is seduction of a softer sort, imploring in its intensity. It is reciprocation, satiation. Will’s lips part with a gasp that Hannibal swallows, tracking it back to the source behind Will’s teeth. His fingers quiver as they push into Hannibal’s hair, trailing cracked nails gently over his scalp.

Hannibal pushes forward and pale thighs fall open, tightening around his ribs; Will tucks his calves against Hannibal’s sides to draw him closer, despite the pain he must feel at the attempt. He catches Will’s cracked lip between his teeth, and it’s a fascinating accident when the skin splits. Blood blooms hot and metallic against his tongue, the flavor amplified by the knowledge of its source. It smears between their lips, and when Hannibal cracks his eyes open, Will’s mouth is tinted red, made dark and rich by the shadow his hair creates across their faces.

Will must sense his gaze. When his eyes open, they are dark as stormy seas, his pupils an abyss of black, fixed on Hannibal’s face with single-minded intensity. He is a banshee, a siren, some beautiful

and terrible creature. Hannibal can imagine the blood on his mouth not as his own, but from a conquest they share. In his mind's eye, he can see Will's teeth sinking into a fresh kill—consuming the hearts Hannibal would give him readily, if only Will knew he could ask.

Will licks the blood from his mouth. His chest heaves as he breathes, and Hannibal can see the gleam of it on his teeth. The sight is singularly erotic. He's drawn forward with the desire to taste again; Will nuzzles him in open affection and Hannibal turns into it, cups Will's cheek and dips his tongue between the seam of his lips, to lap and tease until they come together again. Will's voice trembles, shaking with a moan as Hannibal presses at the joint of his jaw. He pries Will open and takes what he wants, sucks sin and sweetness from Will's tongue, tastes the flavor of life and death from the chalice of his mouth, spilling into him from above.

When they part, Hannibal knows.

Will's lips are pink and slick, blood sluggishly welling from that open split, lapped away before it can drip down his chin. He touches Hannibal's face with shaking fingers, and Hannibal allows it—feels the chill of his fingertips as they brush the bridge of his nose, slide down his cheek, touch his mouth. Will's thumb slips inside and touches the sharp points of his teeth. The sensation is so strange, so intimate, that though the instinct will always be to bite, he doesn't. Will touches his molars, his canines, unknowing of the things that have passed between them.

In this moment, Hannibal wants to tell him. He wants to confess all, but it's much too soon. He wants to take the twisted vision of the Ripper inside Will's head and correct it, iron the creases from this disaster of a day. He wants to place this moment in a gilded frame and hang it among masterpieces.

The pad of Will's thumb lays heavy against his tongue, and Hannibal laps around it; closes his lips around the first knuckle, tilts his head and kisses the side of the joint. Will's pupils fatten. His lips part in sympathetic response. He slips the digit into the soft innards of Hannibal's cheek. The ridge of his fingernail is a sweet sting against the supple skin.

The symbolism is not lost on him: Hannibal is hooked. He knows it. Will knows it. What remains is what Will plans to do about it, and what Hannibal will make of that decision.

Will's thumb slips out. He paints Hannibal's lips with the moisture accrued there. The sounds of their labored breathing echo off the tile. Will stares.

Hannibal wonders if he sees his creation and thinks it good.

He must, because Will bends again and holds Hannibal's cheek in his palm and presses their lips together, slow as seduction, sensual as sorrow, and he does it over, over, over and again. He sups of Hannibal's affection and attention. When Hannibal strokes his fingers through Will's tangled curls, he's rewarded with a boneless sigh.

Will touches their foreheads together again, and Hannibal stares up into the blue of an endless sky. If only for a moment, he holds his breath.

"I want this," Will says. "I want you. I want *us*."

Hannibal's exhale is soft, shuddering. Then this has not been for nothing—the foundations of a bridge between lives has been built, and all that remains is the construction, the transformation. It seems that Will received his message, writ upon the body of a man whose very presence enacted death.

Perhaps God rewards the wicked, after all. Order is birthed from chaos, and this is their beginning.

Hannibal smiles. “Then I am yours.”

Slowly at first, and then brighter than the sun, Will smiles back.

The soiled clothes are put in the wash, and Hannibal gathers his medical kit. He cleans the glass from Will’s wounds with gentle hands and Will’s heavy gaze upon him, but leaves him to shower before he bandages them. In the meantime, his mind races. He cooks.

He slices thin steaks from the remnants of the pharmaceutical representative’s heart (a discourteous man who not only interrupted one of Hannibal’s rare opportunities to visit the symphony with his ringing phone, but also the terrible manners to *answer* it), crusts them in flour and herbs and pan-fries them. He sets them in a foil-covered plate inside the warming drawer, then halves a modest serving of fingerling potatoes. He roasts them in the same cast iron skillet, tossed with lemon and parsley and melted butter, then puts the pan into the oven to crisp. It’s not his usual fine fare, but it’ll do—the

flavors will be agreeable for Hannibal, and with any luck, the casual presentation will be comforting to Will.

Hannibal washes the utensils, the chef's knife, the cutting board. The white noise of the shower carries on overhead. It's certainly been twenty minutes or more, but the hot water will last; Hannibal is more concerned that Will may regress into shock if left alone with his thoughts for too long. If he takes much more time, Hannibal will have to check on him—though he's reluctant to interrupt, lest he violate Will's sense of privacy.

A sound interrupts his thoughts. Hannibal frowns at the electronic beep before he catches sight of Will's bag on the corner chair. He'd nearly forgotten he'd put it there.

Ping!

Hannibal frowns. Another?

Ping! Ping! Ping!

His curiosity gets the better of him. Will's phone is tucked into a front pocket under the flap of the messenger bag. The screen is badly fractured, rough in some places. It is also, however, dormant: not the source of the noises Hannibal is hearing even still.

He digs deeper, into the cavity—and there, a shining beacon glows through the lining of the bag. A concealed zipper pocket, and within it is the culprit. It's a second phone: sleek, silver, anonymous. The screen is filled from top to bottom with push notifications from the email app. All boast the same tagline:

[Abnormal Analysis] Comment on: Incident I-495

In some portion of his mind, Will having more than one mobile device makes sense. He suspects the first device is for Will's personal use. The second mobile is likely for his sources and journalism projects. But the uncomfortable reality remains that Hannibal was unaware of it, and unaware that Will has, apparently, already written and posted an article about his experiences.

Another realization grows, more unsettling than the first: Will has shared what he's seen with strangers before he's confided in Hannibal.

Hannibal swipes across the glass, urgent interest in his mind and a strange, cold feeling in his chest. His lip curls into a snarl when it pulls up a lock screen requiring a passcode. His hand clenches. He inhales deeply and bites the inside of his cheek to find calm within pain.

He doesn't know enough about Will to even guess at the code.

Irritated, Hannibal switches the phone to *silent* and puts the mobile back where he found it. Will needn't know that he's aware of it, especially if it will give Hannibal the opportunity to survey it at a later date. He'll be seeing much more of Will from now on, after all—beguiling creature that he is, and all his mysteries.

For the moment, one remains: he must know what Will has written.

Overhead, the water turns off. He is out of time.

Hannibal exhales through his nose. There will be ample time to read Will's assessment once he's fallen asleep, and Hannibal knows that given the events of the day, Will is close to collapse. He's not

far from it himself, but he can be patient.

Upstairs, Hannibal's medical kit waits in his bedroom, backpack-style with multiple zippered layers filled with everything from Neosporin to sterile suture kits. Treating Will's abrasions should not take long, but it may not be pleasant. He frowns faintly, until an idea strikes. He smiles. Hannibal goes to the beverage cabinet and extracts a glass and a decanter, pouring a generous measure of whiskey. At worst, the alcohol will dull Will's pain. At best, on an empty stomach, it may loosen his tongue.

One way or another, he will have answers. By the end of the night, he will know Will's thoughts, his feelings, the truth of what he has seen. Perhaps Hannibal can gently dissuade his misconceptions, open his mind to alternatives. The Chesapeake Ripper is a killer, not a mass-murderer. Hannibal has no interest in domestic terrorism or public panic. He can only hope that Will is amenable to the suggestion of such.

Will is prideful, after all. And Hannibal would so hate to embarrass his new paramour by proving him wrong.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter Notes

> Sorry for the delay, my dears!! And the delay in replying to comments, which I will fix shortly. Please take this 10k chapter as an offering. Oh, god, please just take it. I was so damn tired of writing chapter after chapter about this night, so I went, "why don't I just finish it?" and then I did, and this is what I've got.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sound of the water fills Will's ears. Everything before the accident now feels so far away that it seems like a different day entirely. Though by now, maybe it is.

Just this morning he'd been in the shower and thought about Hannibal without any other care in the world. And now, here he is, in *Hannibal's* shower, bleeding from the knees to his ankles. Will's hair is plastered in thick curls to his neck, his shoulders, tangling around him in such a way that he feels like he's choking. The pressure of the water bearing down on him feels like drowning. Lemongrass shampoo sinks into the drain, stinging the crushed glass cuts on Will's shins. The suds follow a wave of blood.

Will's only saving grace is that the soap smells like Hannibal. It keeps him grounded. Keeps him present, when he himself feels ready to dissolve like spun sugar, fragile and impermanent. Already, his makeup has melted, washed away and left him exposed. Will feels like he might go with it.

When did he get here? *How* did he get here?

Where is he, again?

Will scratches at his own skin; dirt and grime cakes underneath in crescent slices of grayish-blue. He scrubs at his broken nails, and when that's gone dry blood remains, too deep to be scoured away. Will is stained by the lives of Abby, Clarice, the many nameless others he'd pulled from the wreck before he'd kept going. Perhaps the color red will never truly lift from his skin.

There is a photo negative impression on the inside of Will's eyelids in the shape of The Hanged Man. It, like Hannibal, is the only thing that brings him comfort.

Will opens his mouth and water streams in. He presses the heels of his hands to his eyes, and winces when he realizes they, too, are scraped—laughs and inhales water, coughs until he nearly falls to his knees. He catches himself on the shower knob and knocks it to the side, and suddenly he's standing beneath an arctic deluge. In seconds, he's chilled to the bone.

He wants to cry. He cannot erase what he's seen. He can't eliminate the chaos that he now knows to be the natural order of life. There is no mercy. There is no sense. There is only death and cruelty, blood and fire. Good people make better kindling.

The Ripper knows this. The Ripper has *always* known this. And in the wake of a truly random universe, Will knows with certainty that the Chesapeake Ripper's victims were chosen for a reason,

whatever it may be. Will may yet be blind to it, but he'll see it someday. And when he does, he'll understand the Ripper to the depths of his soul.

Will needs that. He needs to understand.

And in the meantime, he needs Hannibal. The sense he brings, the kindness, the compassion. The soft touches, the shrewd words. Hannibal's practicality is a plaster cast for a broken world, surgical pins holding together the pieces of Will's fractured heart.

Will needs him. Miraculously, Hannibal *wants* him in return.

He stands there, naked and shivering, and for a moment he allows feeling sorry for himself. Then he takes that feeling and burns it out; turns the water to scalding until his skin is beet red, until his wounds scream in protest. Until Will's teeth are bared, gritted with endurance, and what was once pleasant heat now feels like an excruciating test of hale heart.

He can withstand. He can maintain equilibrium, a stasis of normalcy, a mask of indifference—

—but it is so. Fucking. Hard.

Will conditions his hair simply by force of habit. When he rinses it out and his fingers slip through the strands, he flashes back to the feeling of blood. It is nearly incomprehensible that his hands are clean, unbelievable that he is here. He is safe.

He turns the water off and stands still. Water drips from his body, his limbs, his hair. When he finally moves, he feels leaden—squeezes the excess moisture from his roots with weak fingers, works his way to the ends, and by the end he is still sodden. The shower door slides open beneath his fingers; there's only one towel, but Will wraps himself in it bodily. It's large enough to encompass him from chest to thighs, and it's warm enough to feel like an embrace.

The realization hits him all at once: he has nothing else to wear. No outerwear that belongs to him that isn't ruined, and he's reluctant to put his undergarments back on given that he's worn them all day, and the nature of the day he's had. If it weren't for the embarrassment, he might've asked Hannibal to wash them; perhaps he'll be able to make use of the laundry units himself. The only thing he has left is the splint waiting on the bathroom counter, and even *that* was given to him.

When Will looks down, he realizes his wounds are still seeping. He's dripping blood and water on the floor. All he can hear is the sound of the *drip, drip, drip, drip,* and he watches the red and the clear fade together into pink, until his footprints are the color of his favorite lipgloss, until the tile is discolored and he is Moses and the river around him is changing, becoming—

He's not sure how long he stands there. Will only knows when the knock comes, and he is snapped out of his reverie.

"I—" His voice breaks. He is disjointed, confused. "I'm not—"

"Will?" Hannibal says softly, and his voice is a beacon, shining and bright. "Are you well?"

"I don't—know," Will says. Everything feels fuzzy, indistinct. Impermanent.

"May I come in?"

No. "Yes," Will says, because he has to. This is Hannibal's home. Hannibal has cared for him so well.

The door creaks open. Hannibal looks wary; his medic bag is slung over his shoulder, and there is a glass of something amber in his hand. When his eyes find Will, standing sodden and bleeding in his towel, he blinks slowly. He sighs, though not in anything like disappointment—rather, in sympathy. Compassion.

The med bag hits the floor. The tumbler clinks as it touches the shelf; the liquor wobbles within its vessel. Will's eyes are still on it when Hannibal touches his face, his soaking hair.

"I left you too long," Hannibal murmurs. "I knew I should have checked on you."

"I'm fine," Will says on autopilot. He knows he is not fine. "I just can't—" He searches for the words. "I can't."

Hannibal touches him. Will's mind weeps with relief, even if his eyes have not yet caught up. Hannibal guides him until Will sits atop the toilet seat, leaning sideways against the pillar of the sink; he feels for Will's pulse with the pads of his fingers.

"Too fast," he says softly. "Will, you're in shock."

"Yeah," Will replies. Yeah, that makes sense. He probably knows that. He shivers. "I'm cold."

"You're nearly burned." Hannibal's voice is gentle but disapproving. "Will. May I get you a change of clothing?"

"Yeah." That seems okay. Will tries so desperately to get himself to focus. He knows he's making a fool of himself. It's the last thing he wants when Hannibal is so… polished. "Will you stay after?"

"I will accept nothing else."

Hannibal pets him, one hand on his cheek, the other smoothing over his wet hair, down the back of his neck. Will feels like a dog; he feels loved. Owned. Possessed. All the things he has always hated and adored. He feels like an animal. He feels like Hannibal's.

"Can I have something that smells like you?" Will asks. The words leave his mouth before he fully thinks them through. When Hannibal's hands freeze, reality catches up to him. Will is abruptly terribly, thoroughly mortified. "I—that was a weird thing to ask, wasn't it?"

Hannibal's knuckle rests under Will's chin, gently tips his face up to meet his eyes. Will wants to avoid them but he can't, though he cringes like—actually, he doesn't know why. He knows Hannibal would never hit him, hurt him, but he feels like he's done something wrong and he wants to hide from it.

Hannibal cradles his jaw in both palms, sweeps his thumbs back over Will's cheeks, and Will's lashes flutter in bliss. This is so much more than he could have asked for. Embarrassed or not, he wants this. Needs this.

"Not at all," Hannibal replies. His smile is small, but his eyes are warm. "It's said that scent is the sense linked most directly to memory and can provide comfort in times of turmoil. It's no surprise you're seeking out what's familiar to you. Your mind is searching for those stepping stones back to normalcy."

Will leans helplessly into his grip. His eyes are half-lidded, sedate. If he's looking for comfort by instinct alone, then maybe his body's pretty good at it. "I used your shampoo," Will confesses.

Hannibal strokes his face again, and Will feels his muscles soften to putty. “Yes, I noticed. It suits you.” Hannibal pulls away slowly, reluctantly. The thought that he might want to stay is a comfort. “Give me just a moment.”

He goes. Will ducks his face to inhale the scent of the linen—no detergent smell. Will always gets the cheap stuff for home. Maybe he’ll change that once *Analysis*’ advertising snag is cleared up. In the meantime, Will wipes the water from his face, squeezes the ends of his hair in the excess length of the towel.

Hannibal returns, carrying a navy robe over one arm and a bundle of dark fabric in the other. He quirks a small smile as he hands it over—black boxer-briefs, soft to the touch. “These are clean.” And with little ceremony, unfolds the robe and sweeps it around Will’s shoulders. “And this is mine.”

As promised, it smells like him. Will turns his nose into the collar and breathes. He feels surrounded. Encompassed. Safe. “Thank you,” he whispers. “I’m sorry you got more than you bargained for with me.”

“Never apologize for that,” Hannibal says. “Your presence in my life is new and unexpected, not something to be sorry for. Far from it, Will.” He places his hand atop the crown Will’s head, lets it drift down over his temple, his ear, his throat. Hannibal smiles. “I’ll be just outside while you get changed. Then I’ll bandage your legs, and we can talk.”

Will feels a muscle in his temple twitch. Hannibal’s eyes flicker; maybe he notices. But anxiety is a heavy burden to bear, and it’s creeping up Will’s throat. He’s not ready to define what this is, he only knows what he wants, and he wants Hannibal, and other than that—“Now?”

Hannibal inclines his head. “Talking about what you’ve seen can prevent the onset of post-traumatic stress. I’d like to help you however I can.”

“The accident,” Will realizes, and his shoulders slump with sweet relief. He nods. “Yeah. Okay.”

“Good.” But Hannibal doesn’t retreat. Instead, his knuckles brush the side of Will’s neck, gently feeling again for his pulse. It feels so intimate. Nice. Will has never enjoyed being touched before Hannibal came along. Now it feels natural; he wants it all the time. “Nothing else needs to be defined tonight, mylimasis. There’s no need for us to rush. I’m in no hurry.”

He always knows what to say. Will rests his jaw on Hannibal’s wrist, gazes up at him in soft contemplation. A new sense of peace settles behind his ribs, and pleasant, calming warmth within his belly. Hannibal blinks, serene and slow, and bends at the waist to touch his lips to Will’s.

It is belonging, acceptance.

Oh, he’s so fucked.

“Let me know when you’re ready,” Hannibal murmurs, and as he withdraws, the tip of his nose touches Will’s in an affectionate nuzzle. Before Will can process, the bathroom door clicks closed, and he is left wondering how someone with their life so put together could possibly want him, even when he’s dripping blood and water in pink puddles on the floor.

He feels better once his curls are no longer dripping down his neck, when the towel is hung over the shower door. Will smooths just a little bit of conditioner through the ends of his hair before he puts it up. Hopefully that will calm the worst of the frizz in the absence of his usual leave-in formula. Will wipes his hands on the towel and puts the splint back on. When the velcro straps are secured, some of his ache abates. He feels a little more centered.

The boxer briefs aren't Will's normal fare and haven't been since before high school, but they're comfortable; Hannibal's robe is oversized and heavy, obscenely soft against his skin. Will belts it around the waist, and when he catches sight of the silhouette of his body in the mirror, he double-takes. He looks…

Exhausted. There are circles under his eyes without his concealer to mask them. His face looks more broad without the familiar shape of his contour, and his skin is patchy from the residual heat of the shower. There are a few faint, stinging slices—one on his forehead, another along his cheek. Neither bleed actively, but both are obviously *there*. His hair is lumpy on top since he used his fingers instead of using a fine-toothed comb. There is the faintest shadow of stubble along his jaw. The usual markers of masculinity that he works so hard to hide are showing through.

Hannibal has never seen Will like this before. Not *really.* Even in the hospital the very first time, Will was shielded by his clothing, his pretty underwear, the stubborn remnants of his eyeliner and mascara that didn't wash away with an alcohol wipe. Hannibal didn't know him, so it was easier for Will to hide between sharp words and the fort that had so effortlessly sprung from his mind.

Now, Will is laid bare. He is known. He's not at his best and he knows it. Hannibal knows it, too.

Will looks down at the countertop, at the waiting glass of liquor. There's only the one, so Hannibal surely doesn't mean to get drunk *with* him. More likely, it's a peace offering, and the most ancient of anesthetics. God, but his legs really do hurt.

Will scoops it up in his injured hand and inhales the scent of whiskey with a satisfied murmur. When he sips it, there is no burn—it slides smoothly down his throat, warm and smoky. It's good. Ridiculously good. Expensive, definitely. Of course it is.

He fortifies himself. Then he opens the bathroom door.

Hannibal waits outside, arms casually folded behind his back, surveying one of the many paintings mounted along the walls, and Will realizes he has changed clothes—form fitting black pants, and a black button-down to match, the sleeves rolled around his forearms, and the top two clasps undone. He turns when he hears Will, and in the dim light, the movement of his body is leonine. His eyes gleam, rich and dark like merlot, and when they fall on Will, he is sure he's being measured in some way. Likely, Hannibal is taking in all the differences of Will's change. "How do you feel?"

"Um," Will says. Naked. "Exposed."

Hannibal nods. His bangs brush his forehead, fall into his face, and if this is Hannibal when he's in casual clothing and drained beyond measure, then he's even more out of Will's league than previously anticipated.

Will licks his lips. Hannibal's eyes follow the movement. "I see you found the whiskey. I thought it might help."

Will glances down at the glass in his hand and resists the urge to flush. "Hope you don't lose your medical license for giving it to me."

Hannibal's lips quirk. The light in his gaze is sharp, and he approaches—prowls, and Will's heart is in his throat. "Only if you tell."

Will holds out his uninjured hand, palm up; Hannibal takes it and guides Will back toward the bathroom. Will sits on the unused edge of the tub again. He's made a damn mess of the floor, but it's too late to fix that now without a mop. Hannibal, to his credit, seems to have no compunctions about kneeling in the mess as he unzips his medical bag.

"If I get you in trouble, neither of us is any good to the other," Will replies, only half-joking.

Hannibal pauses. He looks up. "Unless we simply enjoy each other, without the need for usefulness."

Will smiles faintly. They're certainly moving beyond the original terms of their arrangement, but he can't say he's disappointed. He takes another sip of whiskey and rolls it around his tongue. Hannibal watches the motion of his jaw before he sets back to his task. He unearths disinfectant on a non-stick gauze pad and swipes at the wounds in light, short strokes.

Will hisses through his teeth. "Ah—alcohol aside, we'll violate ethical boundaries if we keep this up. Patients, sources. It's a big damn mess, we both know that."

Hannibal smirks to himself. He doesn't look away from his task as he opens a packet of neosporin and starts to dab it on the worst of the cuts with a sterile swab. "If you plan on becoming my patient, you'll have some time to wait before I'm in practice. Then I suppose we can start worrying about it." Will huffs. Whimpers, and cringes away; Hannibal catches his ankle and holds him still, though not tight enough to hurt any more than the ointment does on its own. "Steady, darling, I'm almost done."

The pet name grips Will's heart, squeezes until he very nearly cannot breathe. He distracts himself, because the alternative is melting into one of the puddles he's left behind. Another sip, another faint buzz. "You're still my source. Supposedly."

Hannibal places the swab aside and unearths a roll of gauze. "Supposedly, yes. And I will continue to give you whatever information you require, and provide you the opportunity to find what answers I do not have. That won't change for us."

"Then what will change?" Will asks.

Hannibal works diligently. He sprays the abrasions with something that stings, but then starts to numb. He unwraps a non-stick pad and places it against the wound to absorb seepage, then starts at Will's knee and coils the roll of gauze around it, not too tight. "Not much, I imagine. Only that I will be there whenever you need or want me, and we may spend time together whenever we wish. I can still cook for you, and every so often turn up to embarrass you in front of your classmates."

"You're the least embarrassing thing about my life," Will admits. He smiles sadly to himself, and perhaps takes a larger sip than he should. The liquor is hot as it slides down his throat, settles heavily in his belly. He's starting to feel it. "But I might be the most embarrassing part of yours."

Hannibal clips the gauze in place with two metal fasteners around Will's ankle. He looks up at Will steadily from his place on the floor, and there is an intensity to his face that Will can't quite name. "Do I seem embarrassed to you? Have I ever?"

Will swallows around nothing. There is little alcohol left in the glass, but he takes another quick sip. He fidgets defensively. "…no."

“And I never shall,” he replies firmly. He starts on the other leg. “You’ve never seemed insecure of yourself to me, Will. Why would you assume I would be insecure of you?”

Will wants to reach out and touch Hannibal’s hair. He barely resists, and tightens his hand around the glass, then bites the inside of his cheek instead. He barely feels it. “Most people don’t know how to categorize me. One on one is fine, but we get into a group, and suddenly there’s all these… hesitations. They don’t know what to call me.”

“You defy categorization. That’s not a bad thing.” The gauze makes a quiet *swishing* noise as it coils around and down, down, down. “It’s one of the many things I like about you. If I must call you something, I believe I’ll start with your name. Unless you have any protests.”

Will doesn’t. He licks his lips again and ducks his head and everything starts to spill inside him. Words swim before his eyes and fade to black. Defying categorization is the least of his problems. Obliterating expectations is closer to the truth.

He wonders how many furious comments are waiting for him. He wonders how many death threats, and from people who weren’t even there.

Will’s hands clench in his lap. He doesn’t realize he’s gone silent until Hannibal taps his leg—he’s already done wrapping. Will’s wounds are dressed and complete, the bag is zipped, and Hannibal is looking up at him expectantly. Perhaps Will’s eyes are empty, lost as he feels, because Hannibal’s narrow with resolve. He stands and holds his hands out to Will.

Will takes them. He stands, and the world tips sideways; his head rushes, his limbs buzz, and he has grossly underestimated the amount of force it would take to keep him upright. Hannibal catches him around the waist, and the glass as it tips sideways in Will’s hand.

“I’m okay,” Will says, but he’s not. He sways in Hannibal’s arms like The Hanged Man had gently swung from the overpass, a pendulum in motion denoting the flow of time. Will knows he can reverse that flow if he should feel so inclined to watch it again.

He doesn’t want to watch it again, and yet it feels like he can do nothing but.

“Lean against me,” Hannibal murmurs, and his arm is a warm and weighty vise around Will’s body.

Will knows he’s an idiot. He drank too fast, and he’s hurt and he hasn’t eaten anything, and though the whiskey tasted nice in the moment, his body has soaked up the alcohol like water. He is distracted by the lightness of Hannibal’s shirt and his radiant heat from beneath it. He feels so nice, so present, so solid. He is comfort personified.

And if Will defies categorization, then, “You defy… everything I know,” Will says slowly, enunciating each syllable carefully. His tongue feels weighted and clumsy in his mouth. In this moment, it is so desperately important to him that Hannibal is aware. He touches his lips to Hannibal’s shoulder and absorbs the feeling of being wanted and cared for. “Thank you.”

Hannibal’s hands are calm, authoritative, possessive, warm and wide on Will’s back as he touches him. “I’m glad you allowed me to bring you here,” Hannibal says. He swallows, and Will feels it. “When patients started arriving, I feared for your safety. Your life. Having you within reach is a comfort to me.”

“I didn’t even think,” Will mumbles. “I just drove right to where you were.”

Hannibal exhales gently, and his lips brush Will's temple. The stillness stretches between them, until the quiet peace of it passes. "I've made food, if you think you can make it downstairs. Normally I insist upon eating in the dining room, but I think the study will suit us best tonight."

"Sounds good," Will says, and does not move. He lingers for so long that Hannibal chuckles.

"You'll feel better once you've eaten," Hannibal says. "Come on, Will. Can you walk?"

"I can manage."

His legs are mostly numb and certainly unsteady, but lack the agony of movement now that the crushed glass has been removed. Hannibal's arm remains around Will's waist as he draws back, and when he walks, Hannibal moves with him. It's not so bad once he gets going, and they make it to the stairs and slowly downward without incident.

"Smells delicious," Will says as the scent of food fills his nose, the richness of meat and the citrusy tang of lemon, the earthy smell of potatoes.

"You'll have to forgive the simplicity," Hannibal replies, though his voice is tinged with pleased pride. "My only thought was for ease and time. I'll make you something more interesting the next time you visit."

Will is so damn hungry that he'd probably eat a microwaveable meal and not complain. Will tips his head to the side and bumps Hannibal's shoulder as he's led onward. "If it tastes s'good as it smells, you're already forgiven."

The study looks like something out of a home living magazine. A well-organized desk, a full but unlit hearth, plush chairs, a couch and cushions in varying shades of sage, an elegantly modern coffee table. The whole room is green and dark wood, jewel tones and tasteful texture. Hannibal's home is beautiful, and intimidating in its perfection. Meanwhile, Will is hardly standing on his own feet, wrapped in gauze and wearing Hannibal's bathrobe, his hair piled in a damp bun atop his head. Perhaps on a normal day, he could have pretended he belonged. Now it seems so obvious that he is out of place.

Hannibal helps him lie across the couch, then crouches to light the fireplace—oh, it's gas, but fortunately that means the fire is alive and well in moments, and Will is immediately soothed by the sound and ambient heat.

"Should I call this *take three* ?" Hannibal asks with a faint upward tilt of his lips.

Will leans his head back against the cushioned arm and offers a tired, tipsy smile of his own. "Third time's a charm."

Hannibal stands still for a moment. His eyes intently flicker the length of Will's body, his casual sprawl. Backlit by the fire an clothed in all black, he looks fiercely handsome. Will wishes absently that this were any other time, any other night. That he could have this when he feels whole and prepared, when he could feel emboldened by the intensity of Hannibal's gaze, and act upon it accordingly.

Perhaps someday he will have this chance again. But tonight, Will stares up at him, and all he can manage is what he is.

"I'll be right back," Hannibal says, and Will is left alone.

He sighs quietly, and with the beginnings of a headache that could be injury or faint drunkenness or dehydration, Will pulls the hair tie from his curls. He combs through them with his fingers and shifts in place to get more comfortable, lets his hair drape over the arm of the couch.

He squeezes his eyes shut at the memory of blonde hair and a fleshless skull.

Each peaceful moment is reclaimed by horror, it seems. Will covers his eyes with his hands and tries to reconstruct this room in his mind, commit its details and extravagances to his memory as a distraction. But as the patterned carpet covers the floor of his mind, it is laid over asphalt; upon it are not chairs, but overturned cars. The scent of the hearth fire and food is replaced by blood and oil. And when he opens his eyes—

Will jerks violently with shock when he sees that Hannibal has re-entered the room on silent feet, carrying two plates and utensils on one arm like any practiced waiter, a glass of water in his other hand, and Will's bag hanging from his shoulder. He frowns as Will lays a hand over his chest and tries to catch his breath, his heart thundering against his ribs. "Apologies, Will, I didn't mean to frighten you."

"Not your fault," Will whispers. He pushes himself up despite Hannibal's furrowed brow and started protests and sets his feet on the floor, then drops his head to his knees. He takes a deep breath and surrounds himself with the room, the weight of the robe, the warmth of the fire, and Hannibal. He's safe. He is safe. He is—

The couch dips beside him as Hannibal sits, places the plates and the glass on the table and Will's bag at his feet, then wraps his arm around Will's hunched shoulders. "You need to talk about it, Will."

"I just can't make sense of it," Will whispers. The blood. The sirens. The screams.

"It's common in the wake of tragedy to not be able to make sense of death," Hannibal says. His voice is even, soothing, familiar. It is a lifeline Will desperately wants to take hold of. "It's natural."

"No, no, no. It's—" Will cuts himself off. The body swings. The pendulum swings. Everything moves in reverse. The lives he's saved crawl back inside their vehicles to die. Will's cuts heal themselves on his palms, his face. One by one, each victory is reversed to its original state, its original horror, to what it had been when Will first walked upon it. Was he a different person this morning? Maybe he was. "This wasn't death, Hannibal, this was *chaos.* I was surrounded by blood in the streets and the only—"

Will's voice breaks. He swallows hard, laughs sharply. He can imagine comments piling up, condemnations. But does it matter? He knows what he saw. He knows what he knows. "—the only sense I found was hanging from that *fucking* overpass."

Hannibal's grip tightens. Will's heart beats in his mouth. Tonight will be the night he gains everything he wants and then shatters it. He knows that. But he can't lie about this. He can only bear the consequences of his truth. "It's like he had to show me the negative so I could see the positive. Order in the chaos. The Ripper doesn't kill *senselessly*, he has a *purpose.* This was purposeless."

"Do you think it was his intention?" Hannibal asks quietly. His voice is carefully schooled. At least he has the decency to hide the disgust he must be feeling, but Will can't yet find the strength to look up and see it in his eyes. "To see all those people die? Perhaps an act of God."

Will's head snaps up at that. He feels anger in his breast, helplessness. Righteous indignation, and he's not sure if it is his own, or if he's simply read it from the brushstrokes of a murderer's masterpiece.

“The Ripper’s not *God,* Hannibal. He’s just a man, he just—he didn’t *plan* for this!”

Will stammers for words, avoids Hannibal’s eyes, can feel himself start to shake. His head is fuzzy. Without the armor his makeup provides, his entire self feels strange and indistinct. He is brushing up against another outline that is not his own, but it wants to merge with him. It wants to become him, and it is bigger, smarter, stronger.

Will is being consumed.

“I’m sure he sat back and watched the chaos with some measure of interest, but…” Will takes a deep, shivery breath, and it catches. He swipes at his eyes, keeps his gaze on his bandages instead of Hannibal. He stares down at the floor and though he sees green, he *feels* red.

His throat is scratchy. Will’s hand covers his trembling mouth, and he steels himself for the inevitable argument, the disgust, and closes his eyes. “The only man the Ripper meant to kill was The Hanged Man. Everyone else was an accident—or at least it was unintentional collateral damage.”

Hannibal sighs, and Will’s chest clenches with pain and cold at the disappointment. His words, at least, are a measure kinder. “How do you know?”

The words are torn from Will’s lungs before he can stop them. “Because if the Ripper cared about mass casualties, he’d have made a bomb and taken out the bridge. He’s obviously smart enough, but this is a man who makes—makes *organic sculptures.*” Will bares his teeth and resists the urge to snap. He has to hold himself together, despite the fraying he can feel at his edges. “The Ripper is an artist. He curates his body drops, everything from position and placement to exactly when and where they’re found. But he’s *human*—and what happened today was human error, nothing more or less.”

Hannibal is silent. Will presses on.

“Is he responsible? Yes. He placed the obstruction that caused the truck driver to swerve, but *that* is not the same thing as intent. The Ripper sees himself as fair. He chooses his victims, and I don’t know how, but it’s obviously not a *type,* and every scene he makes is personal, so it can’t be random. But this, today? This was random. There was no sense. There was no—” Will’s voice breaks. His lips curl in a silent snarl, aggression and rage and pain with nowhere to go. He snaps his teeth and presses his hands hard against his eyes, curls in on himself and away from the rejection he knows is coming. Away from pain. Away from death. “There was no *point.* That’s how I know.”

For a long time, all Will can hear is his own breathing. Then he feels Hannibal turn—

—*toward* him. One hand on Will’s knee, the other on his back. Hannibal’s chin rests atop his head. “You have an unparalleled mind. Has anyone ever told you that?”

Will’s breath hitches with shock and surprise, a quiet dry sob. “N-no.”

Hannibal kisses his temple. The relief is so sweet that Will turns his head. He meets Hannibal’s gaze at long last, though his eyes are swimming and blurry with the start of tears. What he sees is not what he anticipated.

“Your insight amazes me,” Hannibal says, and kneads comforting circles into the tense stoop of Will’s spine. “You think beyond what you feel. You see with incredible detail. You’re objective. You would make a wonderful psychologist.”

Will hiccups. He tries to blink back the tears. “You’re not—mad?”

Hannibal's brows raise. "Why? Everything you've said is plausible. Am I meant to shoot the messenger when you bring a clear view of your killer's motivations?" Will rubs his eyes with the back of his hands; Hannibal *tsks* and reaches out to wipe beneath his lashes with his thumb. "You're not responsible just because you bore witness. Great revelation can come from tragedy. When the horror of what you've seen has passed, it will have changed you. That's the nature of life."

Will's lips tremble in a bitter smile. "I wrote the article in my car while I waited for traffic to move. When I posted it, the first comment called me a monster because I refused to denounce him. The second told me that *I* deserved to be hung off the overpass if I *endorsed* a murderer. The third threatened to do it themselves. So I…" Will's head drops. His shoulders bow, and he collapses inward, a dying star. His heart is a void, the fear and anger bubbling. Endorse the Ripper? *Endorse?* Like the Ripper is some kind of fucking politician with an empty smile and shaking hands, and not a reclusive artist whose medium of choice is murder? What would Will's opinion matter to a person like that, outside of whether he is right or wrong? But Hannibal matters. His opinion matters to Will. "I know I'm anonymous, I know I take precautions and it wouldn't be easy to dox me, but it's possible. But *you* know who I am."

Hannibal's face is perfect impassivity, but his hand slowly curls into a fist in the back of the robe. "You feared I would judge you as others have judged you."

"I just had to give them another reason," Will says with a grimace. "Like they didn't already have enough when I understand someone like this. Now they see me defending him, but I'm not, I'm just. Clarifying—" Will cuts himself off. He sounds like he's making excuses. How can he explain that just because he knows why doesn't mean he *supports* it? But at least the Ripper's way has *reason.* "It's so much easier to keep your head down, isn't it? To just… not look up. To let everything float on by. Wade into the quiet of the stream and let it all go. But today the water ran red, and—why? Hannibal, why did they have to look up?"

Desperation wells thick on his tongue. Will remembers frightened cries, frightened eyes. He knows for a fact those girls will haunt him to the grave. "I watched two different girls lose family today. I pulled them out and saw the corpses of their parents trapped inside their vehicles. There was no reason. It was just *random,* dumb fucking luck."

"It's the way of the universe, I'm afraid," Hannibal replies. There is something in the tense way he speaks that seems unspeakably angry, though his hand flattens and continues on its path along Will's back. But he is silent, still as stone, and Will is quiet, and when Hannibal continues, he knows the reason for it. "The ones who threatened you—you're safe from them?"

Will nods. Slowly, so slowly, he leans in to Hannibal. Part of him still expects rejection, disgust, for Will's understanding and—yes—*admiration* for the mind of a man that Hannibal has called *his killer.* In a way, maybe the Ripper *is* his. Will has named him. Will has known him.

Will is known in return, though to what extent, he is still uncertain.

If some asshole on the internet posts his address, the last thing Will worries about are anons showing up on his doorstep. He's much more concerned about someone *much* more dangerous. That is, if the Ripper doesn't know exactly where he lives *already.* Clearly he has some idea.

Oh, God. Oh, *God—*

His breath comes in trembling gasps. Hannibal's fingers close around the nape of his neck and drag him close, and he can feel Hannibal murmur against his hair, "Don't be afraid, Will—"

He's terrified, but not of those *people,* but if the Ripper is going to be tried in the court of public opinion and found guilty of domestic terrorism, Will is right up next to him now. He's no longer the star witness. In clarifying the Ripper's intentions, he is seen as defending him. In defending him, Will's an accomplice. And he's socially isolated opposite a man who would gladly make an art installation of his innards.

If they find out who he is, it's over. He will never have a successful career as a journalist. And Will knows this. Knew it when he refused admission to the hospital. In the absence of sense, he'd run into the fray and pulled people out, but now he needs to minimize. He needs to shrink his impact as small as possible and pray that no one knew him, that he can pretend he was never there, that he never got that picture, and—

—no one can ever know.

No one who doesn't already. And that makes Bernadette and Hannibal.

"You can't tell anyone," Will whispers, and his fists clench in Hannibal's shirt, anchor at his chest. "Okay? No one. I know I was an idiot. I know I pulled people out, but none of them will remember me from the chaos, or they're too young to make a difference. But no one can know I was there today. If that article gets linked back to me, my career is dead in the water."

Will looks up. Hannibal stares back, his eyes dark, his lips a thin, grim line.

"Promise," Will begs. "You never break your promises, right? Promise me you won't talk about it. Even Steven. I protect you, you protect me."

Hannibal takes the injured hand that has clenched over his heart and gently pries it away; holds Will's fingers in his and solemnly brings Will's knuckles to his lips. "If that's what you want, Will, I won't betray your confidence."

It's a relief. He is relieved. But everything is building up and he feels like collapsing. He's so damn tired. He's ready to have a meltdown. He'd already be there if it weren't for Hannibal. Will takes a breath, but it doesn't help. He takes another.

"It's going to weigh on you," Hannibal says quietly against Will's fingers. His eyes burn in the low light. "Living alone with death. You must make me a promise in return, and say you'll come to me if it becomes too much, Will."

Will nods shakily. Hannibal turns his palm over and touches his mouth to Will's fingertips. Will can feel his pulse beating in them. He wonders if Hannibal can feel it, too.

He extracts his hand to cup Hannibal's cheek; winces in sympathy, since the vinyl splint must scratch a little, but Hannibal doesn't so much as grimace. When Will leans in, he is ready. Expectant. Tips his head sideways and slots their mouths together until there is no space between them at all, until the indulgent slip of tongues redirects the sorrow away from Will's heart. Will's mind goes quiet and finally, *finally* submits when Hannibal rolls Will's cracked lip so *very* gently between the sharp points of his teeth.

Hannibal's hand slides from his back to his waist, wanders down to settle on his hip. He squeezes gently and Will winces—it's his bruised side and it twinges; Hannibal must have forgotten, but it's enough to pull him back with a soft gasp. "Sorry. Hurts," he whispers.

Hannibal's expression flickers and melts into contrition, and smooths over the area again in apology. "Forgive me, I thought it was the other one."

"S'ok." The sting fades quickly, but the ache lingers. Will's brow furrows and his lips part, shiny and wet; Hannibal's eyes stay locked on his face, and his thumb passes over Will's hipbone in another soothing sweep. He's focused entirely on Will, no facet of his attention reflecting anywhere else. It's strange to be the subject of such a singular regard.

Will wants to kiss him again—wants more than he's fully prepared to give. But fortunately for his sensibilities, his stomach rumbles, and they are both suitably distracted.

"I'm a bad guest," Will says with one final sniffle and a small, private smile. "You made me dinner and I haven't even tried it yet. Terrible manners."

Hannibal seems deeply amused at that. His fingertips trail from Will's hip to his belly in an affectionate caress, and even though the quilted robe, Will's shivers at the touch. "I'll forgive you so long as you promise to finish it all. You need a good meal and a full night's rest." His smile grows. "Doctor's orders."

Will snorts. Though the horrors linger inside his head, for now, his heart is light. "I could eat. I could definitely eat."

He sits up and settles comfortably against Hannibal's side. To Hannibal's credit, it smells fantastic enough that Will would eat it all on a full stomach, besides. Something about steak and potatoes seems so decidedly beneath Hannibal; Will knows the menu choice was not for his benefit, but for Will's.

Hannibal waits with a raised brow as Will slices off a strip of steak, the flour coating crunchy and the inside perfectly cooked. The flavor is rich and bursts across his tongue, and he can't resist a helpless sound of appreciation at the taste.

Hannibal's smile is almost unbearably smug. Will nudges him with his shoulder, chews and swallows before he replies, "Shut up. *Good meal,* he says. *Fucking incredible meal,* more like." Will tosses him a look and a half-serious scowl. His cheeks are pleasantly warm. "You let me freak out when I could have been eating? Next time just hand it to me or something, I promise I'll shut up a lot faster."

"I'll keep that in mind," Hannibal replies in good humor. He watches Will take another bite before he starts slicing his own. "Though comforting you is no hardship, Will. On the contrary; I consider your continued wellbeing to be a responsibility and privilege to look after."

Will pauses in chewing. Savors. Swallows. Leans just a little bit more into Hannibal's side, and for a second rests his head against his shoulder. Warmth burbles inside him; he doesn't want to appear too needy, and he already knows how far outside the bounds of his usual behavior he's gone tonight, but the thought remains: Hannibal is genuinely good for him. And the part of Will that has already laid claim inside the confines of his mind is determined to keep him.

"You too, you know," Will murmurs. He turns his head and looks up at Hannibal, meets his eyes. "I know I'm the wreck of the day, but this goes both ways. I don't care about how established and accomplished and strong and silent you are. You talk a big game about my needs and looking after me, but we're both just people." Will smiles, bittersweet but affectionate. Hannibal blinks slowly and regards him with careful consideration. "I know you must be exhausted right now. I'm falling to pieces, but you saw just as much shit on the other side of this. And if you say you're mine, that means telling me whatever I need to know so I can take care of you."

Hannibal stares at him. Unthreatened, unconcerned, Will stares back. His hair is trapped under his head, spilling over the shoulder of Hannibal's black shirt. He wonders if he'll leave a strand or two behind to be found later. Strangely, he likes the idea. Imagines someone plucking one long, brunette filament from his designer clothing and enquiring about his *girlfriend.* He wonders what Hannibal would say. If he'd correct them.

Will imagines he would.

Hannibal turns his head, kisses Will's cheek in sweet, sincere fondness. "You're a very kind person, Will."

"I'm really not," he replies quietly. "But I don't have much family, and I believe in taking care of what I've got. If we're in this together, you're family." He flushes, turns to his his face against Hannibal's shoulder, and shivers when his nose brushes Will's cheek. "I know it's really soon to say that sort of stuff, but I mean it, you know."

"Loyalty is an admirable thing. And from you, I imagine it's not easily won." Hannibal's voice rumbles through his chest and into Will's. The moment is undeniably intimate.

"Do you feel you haven't earned it?" Will asks. He lifts his head and sits up straight—he really is hungry, and it would be such a waste to let Hannibal's cooking get cold.

Hannibal glances at him. He takes a bite and chews it thoughtfully, and though he makes no sound, Will can tell he's satisfied with the flavor. He looks at Will as he does, and when he swallows, he says, "I will leave that to your good judgement."

"That's such a politician thing to say," Will says with a laugh. They eat in comfortable silence for a time, and the room grows warm from the fireplace. If Will had to mark one of the strangest days of his life, this would be it. Both good and bad, he has been changed forever. But one thing stands out above all else—Hannibal, and the golden thread of fate that has bound them together, that is mending the fraying seams of Will's shape. At long last, he says, "I think you have."

Hannibal has finished eating. He turns bodily toward Will, lifts one leg to rest across the couch. He waits patiently until Will finishes the last bite of his food, leans back against the cushions and looks over at him in turn.

He reaches out for Will's injured hand, and so very gently curls their fingers together. Will's heart rate speeds, but he feels peace. He knows that this is dangerous. He knows there's a good chance this will end badly. But in this moment, Hannibal is safety, and he feels like home.

"Then I'll do what I can to assure your trust is not in vain," Hannibal says.

Will swallows. He nods. And he knows with certainty that though he's not quite there yet, he's going to fall in love with this man, and there's absolutely nothing he can do about it.

"I'll clean up," Hannibal says, "and then we should get you to bed. Forgive me for saying so, but you look exhausted, my dear."

Will doesn't take offense. He knows he looks like hell warmed over. Instead, he smiles faintly. "Yeah, so do you."

Hannibal nods in gracious acknowledgement. "It's been quite the day." He stands, gathers the plates and utensils, and dutifully waits while Will drains the glass of water before he takes the empty vessel.

Uncertainty flutters in Will's stomach—the worry of expectations, but before he can even mention it, Hannibal says, "I'll prepare the guest room for you. Just give me a few minutes and I'll be right back."

He goes. Will is left alone with his racing pulse and his full belly and the terrible sensation of hope. He bends to lift his bag into his lap from where it had sat on the floor. His clothes are gone—as promised, Will guesses Hannibal has set about trying to treat the stains from them. His chest flutters with affection. If his father's jacket can be saved, there's really no price that isn't worth paying. Will knows he's alarmingly nostalgic, but he has precious few relics of Beau, and he'd like to keep whatever he can.

He turns on his phone, careful to avoid the cracked edges of the screen. He can repair it himself, but he'll have to order the part. In the meantime, it's functional; the battery is critically low, but at least gives him the time to shoot off a text to his neighbor and ask her to let Winston out in the morning. She owns a farm several miles down the road, so he knows she'll see it before even the sun rises when she wakes to tend her own animals. He adds a note that if there's a mess, to leave it for him to deal with. It's his own damn fault for falling apart like this, for neglecting his duties to his poor dog, waiting alone for Will to come home.

He's fortunate he'll make it home at all.

He puts the phone into low power mode; he'll plug it in when he gets upstairs. For now, he stows it. And then, with a surreptitious glance up and down again, reaches into his bag and extracts his backup mobile.

[167 Unread Messages]

Will swallows and closes his eyes. His hand shakes. He knows that more than half will be angry. He knows that they may be threatening. He knows he may very well deserve them.

Am I meant to shoot the messenger when you bring a clear view of your killer's motivations?

Will's eyes open.

No. Maybe he *doesn't* deserve them. At the very least, he certainly doesn't deserve them tonight.

He turns the phone off. He puts it away. He can hear the sound of running water from the sink, and really, Will has never been very good at being a *guest* and letting others take care of him. And if this… *relationship* is going to last, Hannibal is going to have to allow him to contribute however he can.

Will rises on shaky feet, slings his bag over his shoulder, and goes to help.

Will lies in darkness. He has been for close to an hour. When his phone lights up at his command, it's the early hours of the morning, approaching three.

He knows he'll have to go to class tomorrow—today. He knows he'll have to pretend everything is okay when he just wants to collapse. Everything is loud and bright behind his eyes, and whenever he starts drifting, he feels like he's falling, and startles back to wakefulness with a pounding heart.

He can't sleep.

A thought lingers in his mind. It's enough to make him nearly sick with anxiety. But nothing can be worse than this.

Will rises from the bed (comfortable, opulent, so different from home with no Winston to keep his feet warm) and pulls Hannibal's robe on, brushes the flyaway curls from his bun out of his face. He leaves his belongings where they lie: his phone on the bed, his bag on the floor, his splint on the bedside table.

He takes a deep breath before he opens the guest room door and creeps down the hall. He stands still for a moment, and his worry is thick in his throat when he lightly, haltingly knocks on Hannibal's door.

No response.

He has two choices, and one isn't really a choice at all. He can either lie awake and in fear all night, or he can ask if he can stay and *hope* that Hannibal doesn't send him away.

Will turns the handle and slowly, slowly opens it. He has only a moment to take in the darkened familiar room, the shape of a man under the blankets, the glow of the street lights outside that barely gleam through thick curtains. The door squeaks.

Hannibal is half-out of bed in a moment; eyes dark, hair mussed, locked on Will's silhouette in the doorway, and Will startles. His back hits the door frame as fight or flight kicks in, even though he knows Hannibal, he *knows* him, it's just surprise and instinct, they've both had a hard night—

They both freeze at the same time. Will tries to catch his breath. Fuck, this was a bad idea. He should have just stayed—

"Will," Hannibal says, and he sounds exhausted. Drained. He heaves a sigh and rubs a hand over his face, his eyes, and slowly relaxes.

"I-I'm sorry," Will stammers. "I knocked."

Hannibal blinks. "Did you?" He asks, and for some reason, that seems to unsettle him. Hannibal sits upright, muscles shifting under skin, and Will realizes as the sheets pool around him that he's shirtless, wearing only sleeping pants. He's more fit than Will would have anticipated, a sculpted physique built for strength, thick arms and broad shoulders, defined pectorals and thick, dark chest hair.

Will's cheeks flare hot. Finding Hannibal unclothed was *not* what he expected, though he's not sure why he expected anything else. It's Hannibal's home, his room, he can do as he likes—

"Will?"

Will snaps back to reality. He meets Hannibal's gaze with an anxious, guilty conscience. "I can't sleep," he confesses. "And I know you probably have to work tomorrow, and I have to go to class, and I'll try not to be in the way, I was just hoping I could—"

"Will," Hannibal says again, and Will falls silent. He stares at Will for a moment, surveys him in the dark, and then exhales. He blinks slowly, and holds out a hand. His voice is drowsy, heavy with his accent when he murmurs, "Come in, mylimasis. Close the door."

The door clicks behind him as it closes, and Will goes; walks the floor on shaking, aching legs and takes Hannibal's hand, pauses at the edge of the bed in the dark. His injured hand touches the knot of the bathrobe belt, and he hesitates.

Hannibal understands. Of course he does. He squeezes Will's fingers and says, "However you will be most comfortable, Will." Then he respectfully turns his attention to the blankets and pulls the covers back, making space for Will at his side. In his bed.

Will's teeth sink into his cracked lip as he pulls the tie free, as the robe slips from his shoulders and down his arms and puddles around his ankles. He is bare but for the underwear Hannibal lended him, and for some reason that feels more naked than his own lace lingerie. Will's heart is in his throat as he crawls into cool sheets and settles beside a warm body.

Will swallows. His pulse is loud in his ears, and it takes him a moment to focus when he hears Hannibal ask, "Nightmares?"

Will scoots closer, not quite enough to touch, but enough to feel his heat. They're close. So close. Hannibal's eyes are half-lidded but intent; the way his hair falls into his face is unfairly attractive.

"No," Will whispers. He wants to touch, but he clenches his hands in the blankets instead. "Didn't get that far. Kept feeling like I was falling."

"An ancient instinct designed to keep us safe in times of stress," he murmurs. His lips turn up in a strange, small smile. "It seems we're both having issues with that tonight." Will nods. Hannibal blinks, shifts in place. "I may be able to help. May I touch you?"

Will is going to explode. His voice is the barest hint of breath when he replies, "Yes."

He shivers when Hannibal touches his waist, burning with sleep-warmth; his lungs stutter on an inhale, and he hears Hannibal sigh softly to match. "Holding you could convince your mind that you are grounded and safe. If you turn, it may be more comfortable."

Will huffs a nervous laugh. He feels ready to vibrate out of his bones. Everything is so different in the dark, without clothing. He feels vulnerable. Perhaps more vulnerable than he ever has. "Spooning?"

Hannibal makes an amused hum, but it sounds on-edge. Perhaps he's feeling this pull as keenly as Will. "Yes. But only if you would like to."

Will thinks about laughing him off, of downplaying the moment. In the end, he doesn't. This has weight. Significance. It's something he wants and needs, and they are balanced on a knife's edge of intimacy and desire. If he's too rough with the fragile thread of their shared fate, it may not repair.

"Okay," Will says, and turns over.

The bed dips as Hannibal shifts closer. Will's breath leaves him entirely when Hannibal's arm settles in the curve of his waist, when a broad palm spreads possessively over his belly. Their legs tangle, and the silky slide of Hannibal's sleep pants against Will's skin makes him shiver. Will's ass is cradled in the slope of Hannibal's hips, and his chest presses firmly against Will's bare back; Will is overwhelmed by his warmth, the texture of his chest hair, the soft swell of his cock through the layers that separate skin, the thrum of his beating heart. His other hand touches Will's hair, smooths his bun up and away before his arm slides under Will's pillow.

Hannibal's lips touch the nape of Will's neck, and Will loses the ability to speak.

“Is this alright?” Hannibal asks, and Will feels the words against his spine, rumbled into his ear, and he bites the inside of his cheek to keep himself from moaning.

He can’t remember the last time someone held him like this. If anyone he’s dated has *ever* held him like this. It’s certainly never *felt* like this.

Will nods. When he exhales, it sounds like a sob.

God, it’s so good. It’s so *much*.

Will covers the palm on his diaphragm with his own. His hand feels small in comparison; he’s never noticed before, never had only the *feel* of it to concentrate on. He notices now as he curls them together. He knows Hannibal can feel the breath rushing in and out of his lungs.

It takes time. Long moments to get used to the proximity, the pressure, the heat. For Will’s heart to stop screaming through his veins and stop creeping up his throat. For him to find words again.

“I’m sorry I woke you up,” Will whispers, and squeezes Hannibal’s hand. He’s exhausted. Fading. Melting into Hannibal’s arms, though he still can’t quite believe he’s there.

Hannibal trails sleepy kisses from the nape of his neck to his throat, up to the shell of his ear.

He murmurs, “I’m not.”

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter Notes

Hello all! First and foremost, thank you for the awesome reaction to the last chapter!! I intend to get around to answering all your comments tonight. <3

Secondly, I think from now on I'm going to try to maintain a weekly update schedule. That way you all know when to expect an update, and I have a deadline to keep myself on task. The current plan is to **update each Thursday**, which will give me all of Wednesday (my day off) to work on the chapter if I fall behind during the week. Adulting is a serious pain in the ass, and a weekly update schedule really helped me with my last longfic, so that's the plan! If anything changes, I will be sure to let you know.

Don't worry, this fic still has a ways to go. :D I'd say we're through arc one of... three? Maybe four? I have a good idea of where I want the plot to go, but how it unfolds is continuously a surprise. Thanks a lot, Will.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Hannibal awakes, he is not alone. It takes a moment to remember why that is so.

(But in the meantime, Will slumbers on, undisturbed. He will never know why, in this moment, it is momentous that he is still alive.)

Once he does, the world resumes.

Will is there. He is warm, his back a broad swath of heat against Hannibal's chest, and his hair falls askew from the bun he had tied it back in the night before. He breathes evenly, content as one might hope to find themselves in the company of their beloved. His jaw is rough with morning stubble, and for a moment, Hannibal envisions what Will might look like if his hair were cropped closer to his ears in the echo of Endymion, rather than lovely Selene. It matters not in the end, Will simply *is,* and Hannibal—

Hannibal frowns. Brushes his lips back and forth across the pale, exposed crest of Will's shoulder, and ruminates on the invasive thought that he is endeared by Will's individuality, his daring mind, his timeless and pleasing bone structure, and the singular ability to shift shapes within his own skin. He is both ephemeral and eternal, feminine and masculine, judgemental and just—Iustitia with scales heavy in her hands, poised to strike down evil with her sword, even while she remains blind to it.

But Will's sword is his pen, and his scale to measure the Chesapeake Ripper is weighted with public opinion. It's terrible injustice that Justice herself is subject to it.

An infuriating injustice that Justice is *threatened* by it.

He will have to keep a close eye on Will. His safety. His well being. It's becoming increasingly clear that Will is a magnet for trouble in all forms, and keeping him out of it may be a full-time job in and of itself.

Hannibal presses his face to the back of Will's neck and inhales the scent of lemongrass soap, fresh linen, of blood pooling beneath his skin in vivid bruises. Will's rear fits snugly against the slant of Hannibal's hips; a lingering half-realized arousal smolders in the depth of Hannibal's gut. The weight of Will's body is lax, trusting in Hannibal's arms, and there is something about Will's presence that doesn't feel intrusive. It doesn't feel like competition, or like danger, nor does Will feel suffocating in his need.

Family, Will had said the night before. It's been many years since Hannibal has even allowed himself to consider the concept as a whole. Now he finds the idea centering on a person.

If only Will knew the truth of the kinship he had found. Would his view of himself change if he knew he found comfort in the touch of a killer? Or would his opinion of the Ripper adapt to suit the kindness Hannibal is capable of?

In the end, it doesn't matter. For the moment, Will does not know the truth.

But what if he could?

The thought is heartening—and deeply unsettling. With it in mind, Hannibal reluctantly extracts himself from the warmth Will provides and tucks the blankets into the space he leaves behind. Will stirs, but does not wake; his brow crinkles in an unconscious frown, and he makes a soft, sleepy noise of discontent, but turns and settles against Hannibal's vacated pillow. His hair is wild around his face, curlier than Hannibal has ever seen it before. Dark circles linger under his eyes, lilac hollows and blue-veined lids, a soft fringe of lashes with mascara clinging stubbornly to the roots. His lips are pink and parted, exposing the barest glimpse of the points of his teeth.

Hannibal commits this moment to his mind: the image of Will asleep in his bed, tangled in silk sheets and heavy blankets. He blames the clinging threads of unconscious arousal when he imagines what it might be like with a different context. If Will's face were unblemished by glass cuts, if his neck were mottled with bite marks. If there was stubborn blood clinging under his nails from the throes of pleasure, instead of the grasp of death.

He imagines Will knowing. Knowing and *wanting.* The fury of his whispered words, impassioned suggestions, both in and out of their bedroom. Will, beautiful and triumphant, gleaming with blood as red as rubies, later writing the poetry of a death created by their hands. At night, convergence—gasping breaths and snarls and lust and greed, consuming and consumed. Order and disorder, twin shadows standing at the top of a food chain less known to the waking world.

They would be together in all things. Known in all ways. Joined. Bonded. Family.

Against everything Hannibal has known for most of his life, he, too, *wants.*

It is with that thought that he rounds the bed, scoops up his fallen robe and drapes it over Will's slumbering form. He snags his shirt from the night before, clean enough to be passable and pulls it on. Prior to taking his leave, he lifts his tablet from its resting place on the bedside table. He lets himself out and softly closes the door behind him.

The sun is risen; it's unlike Hannibal to wake so late, but he owes it to his unusual night. He's gotten only slightly less sleep than normal—four hours, perhaps five. Though given the strain of the day

prior, he certainly feels it. Coffee is in order. He descends to the kitchen and makes enough for two, despite knowing Will is likely to be asleep for hours yet. As he should: he's exhausted, overwrought, healing from his trauma.

Trauma that he has given voice to, and that Hannibal is about to discover.

Hannibal sits at the head of his dining table with only his teacup and his tablet, and begins to read.

Incident I-495: This Is What Happened

I try to speak about my impressions of the Chesapeake Ripper's killings in an impersonal sense as much as I can. I'm finding that a little hard to do today.

I saw a body hanging upside down from an overpass, posed as the major arcana tarot card The Hanged Man. He was tethered from one ankle. The other leg was crossed peacefully over his knee. His clothes seemed completely untouched by gravity. I would later realize that this, and the pose, was because they were sewn in place through the body's flesh. And most of it was there—unlike some prior victims, this man was almost whole. The exception was a perfect hole where the heart had been cut out, and the victim's entire face gone, polished down to the dull yellow bones of his skull, leaving the scalp attached. His hair was pale like corn silk and swayed with his body in the wind.

The Hanged Man was suspended from an overpass allowing Persimmon Road to transect the Capital Beltway, not half a mile from the Maryland state line. One hundred feet before that was a sign that I stared at for a while that said ***Fender Bender? Please Move Vehicles From Travel Lane. Police Assistance Call *77.***

I wondered if it was a joke. I think it was. The Chesapeake Ripper was poking fun at the reaction of self-ascribed decent people. "Go ahead," it says. "Call the cops."

But I don't think the Ripper was laughing after what happened today.

I'll be the first and the last to say it: the Chesapeake Ripper didn't intend for the 37-car pile up that caused at least a handful of people (number yet unknown) to die. I think he intended ***one*** *of them to die, and that was the one he left. Everyone else will come as a surprise, and it won't be one he's happy about.*

"But he should have expected it," you say. "How could he not expect hanging his victim on a busy highway to have consequences? Accidents happen every day!"

My answer is: not in his world, they don't.

The Ripper is primarily a creature of order. Everything he does has a purpose. Every detail he leaves has a place. He makes his decisions carefully, and usually weighs potential actions with the expectation of consequences. He doesn't leave bodies haphazardly all over the road. He doesn't deal in overturned cars and uncontrolled fires.

The Hanged Man's body tells me the Ripper is awaiting a time of transformation. The intersection where it was left tells another message—historically, persimmons represent the passage of time to gain wisdom. He is waiting for an awakening, a new sense of enlightenment

and understanding. The removed face of his victim is telling of the following major arcana card, Death, which denotes a time of change from one event into the next.The removal of the heart says something else.

Someone has caught the Ripper's attention. Now he is waiting to see what they will do, and who they will become.

It's a clean message. A whole and complete thought. It is art in the form of a body. Everything else underneath it was a disaster zone of artlessness. If the Ripper wanted to kill that many people, he would have done it before now. Why curate a career of single sculptures in short bursts, and then interrupt his triumphant streak with a mess? It's sloppy. It's beneath him. The only reasonable explanation is that the accident was not the Ripper's design.

Major news media outlets are already condemning the Ripper as a domestic terrorist and a mass killer. I would advise them to take caution in misinterpreting his intentions. While the Ripper is absolutely a serial killer, he has carefully built a reputation and a name for himself with deliberate murder tableaus and artfully rendered displays. Destroying that reputation for the sake of sensationalist coverage may anger him and cause him to lash out. He may even extend beyond his usual cycle of three to make sure that his set is uninterrupted and properly understood.

In the meantime, I warn anyone reading this to hold their loved ones close tonight. Lives have come to an end without warning. Those lost today were good people. Old and young, parents, siblings, children. There is no karmic order to life that protects us because of good behavior. It is all you can do to live each day the best you can.

But after what I've seen today, if death has to come for everyone, I'd rather meet my end at the Ripper's hand than the hand of God. At least one of them cares enough to see us die in person.

[See All 326 Comments]

Hannibal sets the tablet down, and fights the urge to leave it and his coffee where they rest, to go back upstairs and crawl into bed beside Will again. He doesn't, though he'd like to.

Professional from the first word to the last; clear and direct, delightfully insightful. From the locale to the detail of the stitching, Will's interpretation of his thoughts—

Hannibal locks the screen and watches it go black. It seems he has a lot to think about, and plans to make, starting with how best to clarify the Ripper's intentions to Will without Hannibal revealing himself in the process.

He will only accomplish it if he can be patient.

For now, one thought remains in the back of his mind, one sense of keen pleasure interwoven with exasperation. Of *course* Hannibal has noticed someone. Perhaps he needs to be a bit more obvious to prove to Will the *who* and *why.*

But the Chesapeake Ripper is the public's new Most Wanted. Any and all will be suspicious of strangers, and caution will be necessary if he's to make it through this time undetected.

Hannibal drinks his coffee in silent contemplation. He likely has a few hours before Will wakes up, but there are things he can accomplish here at home. With that thought, he stands, gathers his tablet and his cup, and heads for the kitchen.

The foundation of their bridge bears blood in the mortar, steel cables stretched across the chasm between them like desperate, grasping fingers. If Will would prefer the Ripper's hand to God's, then Hannibal will certainly give it to him—will wrap his palm around Will's bleeding heart and squeeze it back to life.

And if Will reaches back and ends up wrist-deep in Hannibal's chest in the process… well, Hannibal can safely say that he would prefer Will's hand to God's, too.

Will wakes up alone in an unfamiliar place. Normally this would not be a cause for panic. However, in this instance, there are screams rattling around inside his skull, and the weight of the blankets echoes the distorted nightmare of a crushed car bearing down on him, and Will *freaks*.

He hits the floor hard, nearly re-breaks his arm, and only realizes once he's on his ass that the thing entangling him is a robe, not the mangled remains of a seatbelt. His heart pounds as he pulls it over his arms, barely gets it pulled around his chest before he's on his feet, dizzy and panting with the strain. He trips, and his shoulder hits the doorframe on the way out; his head is a mess of aches and pains more related to dehydration than last night's drunkenness. Will's legs are weak, and it is to his great fortune that he catches himself on the railing at the top of the stairway without falling down them—

—Hannibal stands at the bottom, staring up with a pinched look of concern, and Will's mind starts to calm.

"Will," he says, and slowly starts upward. He is cautious in his approach like he's not sure he's welcome. It's quite the opposite, in fact. Will can't imagine being happier to see anyone else. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah," Will says softly, blearily. Shit, he's tired. He was too crazed to even realize it before. "I was just—" Scared. "—anxious. Didn't really remember where I was, and I was alone, and..."

He cuts himself off when Hannibal meets him halfway. Will sags against the wall and the railing, careful not to lean too much weight forward, lest he lose his balance and send them both crashing to the ground floor.

Hannibal is patient, gentle as he touches Will's face, rests a hand at the curve of his neck. "I'm sorry you woke up alone. I've been awake for some time, I didn't want to disturb your rest." His eyes are dark, affectionate, attentive. Will thinks he'd forgive just about anything when Hannibal looks at him like that. His hand drifts down to Will's and takes it in his own. "Where's your splint? Still upstairs?"

Will nods dumbly. Being touched feels nice.

"Well, a little time without it won't hurt," he says. He gently tugs, guides Will downward toward a the scent of coffee and food and *that* is everything right with the world. "I'd hoped you would wake soon. I made food if you're hungry."

“Starving,” Will admits. Upon further introspection, his whole body hurts. That’s just great. “I wouldn’t say no to caffeine and some advil, too.”

Hannibal shoots him a sidelong glance that morphs into a faint, fond smile. “I believe I can accommodate that reasonably well, though I’d prefer if we didn’t start off each morning feeding you painkillers. We shall have to endeavor to keep you whole and uninjured going forward.”

A shocked, ragged laugh is pried from between Will’s teeth. When Hannibal slows for Will to catch up, Will leans into his body with his own. His voice is exhausted, resigned when he says, “You might have to have to take that up with the Ripper.”

An odd look crosses Hannibal’s face. It’s not fear, as Will might expect from any reasonable person being told to face down a serial killer for the well being of their… maybe-boyfriend. Nor is it disgust. In truth, it’s something Will can’t categorize, which is in and of itself, extremely unusual. Then again, it’s not his best morning, either.

But then slowly, strangely, full of teeth, Hannibal smiles. “I’ll be sure to.”

Early afternoon sees Will in the hospital parking lot, the Bentley pulled up beside Will’s old Volvo. The contrast is staggering, Will thinks, as he leans his hip against the back bumper of his station wagon. The difference between them is less obvious now. Will is comfortably clothed in his own pants, one of Hannibal’s button-downs, and an oversized but painfully expensive wool coat.

I insist, Hannibal had said as he slid it onto Will’s shoulders in the entryway, tied the belt around his waist with sure fingers. *Don’t ask me to send you out into the cold without anything to keep you warm. It’s just for a little while, Will. Ease my conscience.*

Will yielded, of course, when faced with that concerned, affectionate gaze and strong hands smoothing the wrinkles from the fabric. The coat is beautiful, slate-gray and heavy, smells like tasteful cologne, and even standing so close to Hannibal himself, Will can’t help but to tuck his face into the collar and inhale.

His jaw has been shaved smooth, his belly is full, and though it’s not the full extent of his normal routine, Will’s touch-up makeup supply has been enough to redefine himself. He feels moderately more like a person, but only just. Lingering deep in his gut is a sense of anxiety and foreboding at leaving Hannibal that no under-eye concealer could ever truly erase. Will worries at his lip with his teeth; Hannibal leans against the back of Will’s car, close enough for Will to touch, but he doesn’t. He doesn’t, and he’s already in withdrawal.

“I’ll be here if you need me,” Hannibal says, and allows Will his distance, little though it may be. The space between them feels intimate even without touch. “And you may call me at any time, Will.”

“I know,” Will murmurs. His voice is lost to the din of the garage, but Hannibal reads it on his lips anyway. Then, like a capsizing ship, Will leans forward until his face touches Hannibal’s shoulder. He noses at the navy overcoat, shivers at chilled leather against the nape of his neck from Hannibal’s gloves as he’s held close. It’s cold. Will knows that underneath the layers, Hannibal is warm, but he can’t feel it like this. Part of him longs to crawl back into the passenger’s seat of Hannibal’s car, to ask to be taken back to his home. He’s fairly certain Hannibal would do it if he asked.

But he can't. Life must go on. Will must return to class, and Hannibal to work, despite the weighted knowledge that nothing will feel quite the same ever again.

"I'll return Bernadette's clothing to her," Hannibal says. "And assure her discretion. I'm sure she won't mention your presence yesterday."

"And tell her thank you," Will mutters into the coat.

Hannibal chuckles, and Will is sure it's at least partially at his expense. "Of course."

Neither pulls away. Will wants to stay forever. He almost thinks about saying it, but—

"I enjoy your closeness," Hannibal says into to Will's ear, and it sounds like a secret shared between them with heads bent, his lips against Will's unbound hair. One hand remains curled around the base of Will's neck, and the other loops around his waist. He falls into Hannibal's gravity with ease. "Last night, this morning. I want you to know you're always welcome with me, Will. If you want me near, you need only ever ask."

"I want to stay," Will confesses, turns his head for his lips to brush the side of Hannibal's throat as he speaks. He feels like he's drowning with how much he wants, how his heart races when Hannibal's fingers tighten around the nape of his neck. It's only propriety that won't allow him to *have.* "But I have to go to class. I have to keep going. I'm…" Will searches for the word. "Unmoored, right now. I don't want to lose myself. You might not recognize me if I do."

Hannibal's glove feels like the slide of cool water through his hair, tangling in Will's curls and guiding him up into a kiss that makes his knees weak. Will shakes with it, his body bracketed by Hannibal and his father's old car, and feels the two sides of his life tearing away from each other. There is no common ground. On one side is his humble beginning, and on the other side is Hannibal, a sophisticated existence that Will does not yet fit into properly. He's a guest there, not a resident—but he knows Hannibal would make it so, if only Will would let him.

Will wants to let him.

No, *half* of Will wants to let him.

The other half wants to pull Hannibal down to meet him, as they meet now in a slick slide of tongues. Take all his polished edges and mess them up, make him rough. Make it so he'll never forget Will, even once the Ripper catches up to him and elevates the sum of his underwhelming life to art. It's selfish, so fucking selfish, to want to ruin this man so he remembers Will when he's gone.

He knows he can't avoid the Ripper. In truth, Will's not even sure he wants to. He's sure the moments before his inevitable death will hold the most clarity he's ever had in his life. Complete understanding of someone who comprehends the universe more than Will ever could on his own. Enlightenment by proxy.

And Hannibal is acceptance by proxy. Will dares not call it love. He doesn't *deserve* to call it love, knowing what he knows. Knowing how fast this is moving. Knowing his intentions in the end. Knowing that, whatever Will feels for Hannibal is burning hot and bright, but its half-life is short.

Hannibal murmurs into his mouth, "Whatever shape you take, my regard for you will not change."

Will breaks away, licks his lips, watches Hannibal watch him. He takes Hannibal's face in his hands, absorbs the intensity in his eyes, the single-minded focus rapt on Will, ochre eyes so deep and rich

that they burn like embers. It's like staring into the sun, and Will feels himself going blind for anyone else. The image of Hannibal like this will be seared permanently into his mind.

"I feel like I've dragged you into my world," Will whispers, and tremulously brushes his thumbs over the sharp ridges of Hannibal's cheekbones. The melancholy of it is profound, but he wants this too much to stop.

There is something staring back at him that is wide and dark, lurking inside Hannibal's gaze. There's a certain possessiveness that lives in the heart of successful men, that locks onto things that they want when they find them. Will is now certain that, for Hannibal, he is one of those things. He's certain that Hannibal would fight for him.

But there is a difference between powerful, prideful men, and the kind of person that the Chesapeake Ripper is. Hannibal's life has purpose in saving the lives of others. He means more like *this* than he ever would in death.

Will has to keep him alive, no matter what it takes.

"I got here on my own," Hannibal replies. He leans in again and Will relents; his lips part before they touch, and he moans quietly at the press of Hannibal's tongue as it slips between his teeth. He's surrounded by sensation—the buttery softness of leather, the heaviness of fine wool, the liquid heat of not being alone inside his own mouth, and the aching emptiness of wanting to *have.*

Hannibal sucks at his lower lip, laps around the place where the stinging split has tentatively started to heal, and pulls back. Will is left panting, wide-eyed, hands shaking at his sides, glad for his Volvo to hold him up and the thickness of Hannibal's borrowed coat so he can't feel how badly Will wants him.

Hannibal smiles like he knows. "But I appreciate the company." His hand slips from Will's hair, down his spine, falls away.

The distance between them now feels monumental. Will clenches his hands into fists to stop himself from reaching out again, and tucks them into his pockets. He takes a breath to steady himself, ducks

his chin, breaks their eye contact.

Will has been flayed raw. Hannibal has seen the truth of him. He's perhaps the only person alive who's ever done so, and it leaves Will feeling uncomfortably exposed. "Thank you for taking care of me, Hannibal. For caring about me. For everything."

"Will," Hannibal says. He waits. "Will," he says again, and Will looks up.

Hannibal is solemn. Serious. His head tips to the side in silent surveyance, and his hair ruffles with the movement. He's so damn put-together. He walked away from yesterday like nothing had happened at all. Is that the kind of thing that comes from years of experience in emergency situations? Will wonders if, with time, he'll become as immune to the violence in the stories he covers.

"You thank me like you believe you'll never see me again. This is not our end. This is not goodbye," Hannibal says. Will's heart stutters painfully. "This is our beginning, yours and mine. The journey is ours to share. We have exactly as much time as we wish to have."

Will's smile falters, but he grits his teeth through it. "I know," he lies. He sighs as he inclines his head, a mirror of Hannibal that sends his curls spilling over his shoulder. Hannibal doesn't look like he believes him. It's just as well. But let him wonder. "I should go. I'll call you when I get home tonight." A lump forms in his throat at the thought of sleeping alone. Of facing the nightmares with the dark silence of Wolf Trap surrounding him. Of Hannibal not being there.

"I'll hold you to that," Hannibal replies. He takes a breath, exhales. His eyes rove Will's face with an intensity that makes him want to fidget. "Be safe, mylimasis."

Will nods. He takes a step back, denying the magnetism that wants to pull him forward. "You too."

Hannibal stands rooted in place, and only moves once Will is in the driver's seat. Will's hands are white-knuckled on the wheel as he pulls away, out of the garage and into traffic.

He makes it halfway to campus before he pulls over. Every car that speeds past him feels like a bullet dodged. His hands shake too badly to do anything but cling to the wheel. His vision blurs through the tears, and every breath shakes his bones. A lead weight sits atop his head, atop his mind, and he is being crushed under its weight.

"It's okay," he whispers through the encroaching blackness. "It's okay, it's okay, we're okay."

And then everything is still.

Calm.

Will takes a deep breath and lets it out. His limbs feel heavy, but no longer weighted. Behind his ribs, a void opens up. His hands shake with the remaining adrenaline, but his mind is quiet.

Will lifts his head with purpose, looks into the rearview mirror, and wipes the mascara from under his eyes. When another vehicle speeds by, he does not flinch. He takes his chapstick from the cup holder and puts it on; it's sheer, coral-colored, and smells more like peaches than it tastes.

"Okay," Will whispers. His voice is softer, smooth with temperance. He fixes his bangs in the mirror. Cracks the car window and lets the cold air wash over him. It stirs the scent of familiar cologne. His overwhelmed senses rewind from one hundred percent to zero. "Okay."

He folds himself inside Wilhelmina's confidence. Inside Hannibal's calm. He will rebuild himself piece by piece, that much is true. But parts of him are broken, and need to be replaced. Will is faced with the unique opportunity to choose what to include.

More than restoration.

Creation.

"We're okay," Will says to all the fragments of himself, shifts out of park, and starts to drive.

Chapter End Notes

rebloggable

absolutely gorgeous commission by @iruutciv for this chapter.

2:1

Chapter Notes

> And here we are, the very beginning of Arc Two. Y'all can thank Rowan (aka HigherMagic) for the fact that this fic is going to be very.... very, very long. I mean, it was gonna be long before, but Rowan basically added an entire subplot by chucking ideas at me, all the while screaming for me not to tell her any spoilers. You'll notice I've now gone back and re-numbered the chapters in accordance with their arc. Right now, I have three planned, the third being the longest. This fic is gonna be one big, long descent into sweetness and madness. Hope you're ready to come along for the journey. :D
>
> Big ol' thank you for this fic hitting more than 5k hits and 400 kudos!! You're all amazing, and I hope to bring you on this journey with me for quite some time to come. Really... it's gonna be a while. ~~lol fuck me~~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He makes it through class by sitting in the back. Will isn't known for being sociable, anyway. Screams echo in his ears instead of the lecture on ethics law, but it fortunately requires little to no participation. It's only his first day back after the accident, and Will is determined to weather the creeping shadows he sees in the corner of the room, the sirens wailing on the horizon of his mind. He dedicates his attention to taking notes and hopes they come out coherent. Despite his shaking hands, he has fewer typos and red underlines in the word document than he expects, so that's something.

And then he makes eye contact with *fucking* Freddie Lounds across the classroom, sees her looking at Will's cut-up face and Hannibal's coat like she's just gotten the scent of a solid lead, and he swears under his breath, because damn it. *Damn* it.

Will flees as soon as they're dismissed. Knight Hall's atrium is light and bright, white tile halls and a wall of windows from floor to the vaulted ceiling. The sounds of student conversation filter down from the raised upper level, and Will stalks toward the staircase to slip out of view. But he's wobbly on his heels, his bandaged legs are sore, and Freddie is nothing if not quick. Their classmates are hens, and she is a fox—but Will, too, is an opportunistic omnivore. Even in his injured state, he has more dangerous teeth.

He slows on the ascent and she pounces. "Not looking so good, Graham," she says as she vaults up the stairs behind him. The soles of her sporty sneakers squeak as she takes them two at a time, and for a moment, Will wavers. He clutches the railing with creaking bones and white knuckles as the sound becomes squealing tires, flames licking at his heels, the crunch of glass—

Freddie heads him off, stops him cold, blocks the flow of traffic on the stairway, much to the irritated grumblings of their classmates who are forced to go around them. Her eyes are huge, sharp blue like his, and if Will didn't know her better, he'd take that expression for concern. But he does know better.

He knows Freddie doesn't mean him well. He feels Wilhelmina prickling behind his gaze, assessing their rival; Freddie embodies everything he wants and everything he hates at once. It's a rare trait.

"Get out of the way," Will says.

"No can do." Freddie crosses her arms across her chest. Her leather jacket looks old, worn. Thrift store. Smells like car interior, and Will sees overturned seats instead of her sharp, almost accusatory expression—"I know you were there."

Well, if she won't move, he'll go around her. As he tries, she blocks him. His head aches. His teeth ache. His hands ache. He wants to hit her, but thinks of Hannibal. Will's supposed to be coping, but all he wants is to go home.

First and foremost, no one can know. His only option is to deflect. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't play dumb with me. You missed class yesterday," she says. For someone so slight, she's learned to use her frailty like a barricade. As afraid as people are of looming threats, they are equally reluctant to break fragile things. Most can't tell from looking at Freddie that her ivory skin is stretched over barbed wire. She looks like a china doll. Will feels more like a dime-store cast-off. Today, he is as beaten and bruised as they come. "I know you were the *only* person who called him the Chesapeake Ripper and now everyone on the Eastern Seaboard has that name in their mouths. Shame you didn't trademark it. You could have been rich."

Will stares at her balefully. She's tried this before, to pry an admission out of him. For as long as *Analysis* has been running opposite *Tattlecrime,* she's had her superior hit count to lord over him, her increased ad revenue from her tabloidism while Will picked apart abnormal psychology over everything from abductions to serial burglaries. He's spent his undergraduate career in the mud, boots on the ground. Prior to the Caldwell murder, he'd have been lucky to get more than a few hundred hits on a page. One viral article had put him front and center on her radar. The second meant *target locked.*

He supposes he can't blame her, though resentment is the primary emotion on his mind. If turnabout were fair play and her smear campaign had been the coverage that got picked up on the Ripper, Will might have gone ballistic. In the months following the Ripper's footsteps, Will's gotten a feel for him. He knows the Ripper wouldn't abide a liar. Similarly, he knows the Ripper wouldn't stand anyone using his work to further their own agendas.

Will is a reporter. An interested observer. Freddie fancies herself a rabid dog catcher while she dangles scraps over the nose of a wolf, and she has no idea what she's getting herself into. She has no idea what Will's spared her from. At the very least, he'd like to think that the Ripper's focus on him might keep Freddie from getting herself killed.

Will almost hates her for it. "Trademarks are for products, not people."

Freddie's gaze is unwavering. "People can be products."

Will's bag weighs heavily on his shoulder. His legs radiate with pain. He imagines how the Ripper might stage Freddie if she ever had the gall to say that to his face, knowingly or unknowingly. The image of a man with his tongue flattened inside a bible flashes before Will's eyes. He had been among the first publicized set, but not the Ripper's first. Certainly not his last.

The Chesapeake Ripper™—murders as the miniaturized replicas of masterpieces sold off the shelves in museum gift stores. The Ripper, *Will's* Chesapeake Ripper, mass produced at low quality for

consumption of the general public. The idea is abhorrent. “Not to me.”

“Then you’re a bigger idiot than I thought.” He clenches his fists at his sides; his broken nails feel like claws. He’s worn too thin to be dealing with Freddie right now. She looks him over and clearly thinks the same; cuts to the chase, because despite all her many bad qualities, when Freddie wants something, she starts off direct. He respects that much about her, and not much else. “How did you get there so fast?”

“Think you’ve got the wrong idea,” Will replies. He can’t summon the energy for a smile, nor would she expect one of him. “I drank too much Monday night. I was hungover yesterday. No state to go anywhere at all.”

Freddie’s eyes narrow. She taps her toe sharply against the stairs. “You’re limping.”

She doesn’t believe him. Will knows that. She doesn’t have to. It’s enough for him to know she won’t find hospital or police records. Outside of finding a witness to identify him in the mess, she’s out of luck. Will arches a brow despite his thundering heart and tells her the truth. “Spent the night with my boyfriend.”

They’re at an impasse. Freddie’s lips purse in displeasure, and fine lines crease the corners of her eyes as she frowns. “You know I’m going to find proof.”

She can’t trace his IP back to him. She won’t find him on public record. “Of my hangover? Best you’re gonna do is get me banned from Tune Inn when you tell them my ID was a fake.”

Will tries to step around her. Yet again, she stops him—this time with a hand on his chest. Will wonders if she’d be so quick to touch him if he had breasts, and wrenches away. Her hand is petite, dainty, cold. He can practically feel the spite in her fingertips. He wonders if she can feel his. Hopes she does.

“You’re not half as smart as you think you are, Graham,” Freddie snaps.

Impatience builds beneath his skin, and a dull sense of panic. He’s getting antsy. He can feel eyes on him from curious onlookers, their classmates. Their unasked questions rattle inside his skull. His legs hurt. He wants to talk to Hannibal. Will wishes he could admit his presence if only to force her to leave him alone, but that’s off the table. “As long as I’m half as smart as you think *you* are, Lounds. There’s no story here. You’re wasting your time.” Irritation builds and makes his tongue sharp when he snaps, “I guess the intel from fucking morgue interns in the supply closet is only as good as the lay.”

A moment of silence. Will hears at least one person sitting on the couches below start to snicker. Another whispers *oh, snap,* and Freddie goes red in the face.

He knows with a sickening sense of immediate dread that he’s made a mistake when her eyes fall to Hannibal’s coat. Her responding smile is razor-sharp. “You’re right,” she says. Her hand touches her mouth in cruel contemplation as she tips her head to the side. Red ringlets spill around her neck like blood. “Maybe you’re good for something, after all. I should set my sights higher. Available doctors are in such short supply nowadays.”

It takes a second for her words to sink in. Panic is a gag in his mouth, and the urge to strike her a vise around his throat. She corners him, she interrogates him, and Will can take that. He can. But if she dares to do anything to Hannibal—

His vision goes red. Fury lingers behind his eyes, staring out through him and focusing on her. There's a certain weight inside his ribs that is borne from a predator readying to strike in defense of their mate. Will knows better than to try to deny it. His fists clench at his sides. His voice catches in his throat and shakes as he forces it out. "You're not the only one with intern friends in convenient places. Don't get anyone else involved in this, Freddie. I mean it. Don't go chasing ghosts where there aren't any."

Freddie smiles; she lights up like she's won something. "My, someone's defensive," she purrs. "Have something to hide?"

"No," He snaps. "But I have a good man's reputation to protect from your bullshit." Will takes a step up. It forces them closer together; Freddie grimaces, but doesn't back down. Will's voice drops to a whisper. "You think I'm spiteful now? If you wreck this for me, I will ruin you, and I'll do it better than you've ever sabotaged yourself by opening your mouth."

"Careful, Graham," Freddie replies softly. Her eyes narrow. "One might get the impression you're making a threat."

"If a threat is a promise of justified retribution to an unjustified witch hunt," Will imagines all the ways he could make her bleed, personally and professionally. Wilhelmina shifts restlessly beneath his skin. Graceful. Merciless.. Somewhere in the core of this body they share, the two of them despise her, equal but opposite how strongly they feel for Hannibal. "Then yes. Back. Off."

Freddie smiles, ice and glass. "If he really loves you, nothing I say will change what he thinks. But maybe he should be aware of the kind of person you are under pressure."

Will forces a smile in return. In all honesty, he bares his teeth. Of course Hannibal doesn't love him. It's too soon for that, and that's exactly Will's concern. This thing between them, whatever it is, is fragile. Promising, yes, for however long it lasts, but it's not impervious.

But admitting that to Freddie is as good as admitting defeat. She's looking for weaknesses anywhere she can find them—and right now, Will has more than he'd like to admit. Hannibal is first and foremost of them, and she knows it.

So he arms himself with words, because he's good at it; levels her with a stare that gives no quarter when he says, "Hannibal knows what kind of person I am under *everything*." Let her make of that what she will. Let her make of it what anyone else would, and what Will *wishes* his last twenty-four hours had been, instead of the reality of what they were. "But good luck, I guess."

Freddie stands still. "I'll take that as permission."

Will inhales slowly through his nose. He takes one more step up, forces her stumbling backward up the stairs; she nearly trips before she pivots sideways, and Will ends up two stairs above her, staring down. His eyes burn. Fury leaks from his pores, and Will straightens his spine, lifts his chin, feels powerful like this. Regal. His hair piled atop his head is his crown, the heavy wool coat his armor. It feels like Hannibal's hands on his shoulders, his lips at Will's ear.

When he imagines her taking Hannibal from him, Will feels as the Ripper feels. The Hanged Man swings in the amphitheater of his mind, and her hair is red. "You should take it as a warning, Freddie."

He can feel her resentment. Taste it. And he can sense her determination, see it reflected back at him. "You think you're untouchable because you hide your IP and encrypt your notes? People talk,

Graham. You obsess over crime. You put yourself in the heads of criminals. You're even starting to defend them." She clicks her tongue in patronizing disapproval, but her expression blazes. "*When* that site gets linked to you, it might even bring up doubts about your involvement. Where were you when the body dropped?"

Will feels eyes on him. The sensation puts his heart in his throat. Is she trying to align him with the Ripper? He holds up his broken arm, nudges down the sleeve to show his splint, and sneers. "Doing something more useful than making baseless accusations. You should try it sometime."

Freddie's eyes flicker to it, and back to him. "Fresh cuts on your palms."

"Tripped," Will lies flippantly, and tucks his hands into his pockets. His patience has come to an end. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have forty minutes before my next lecture. I'd love to stay and chat, but I don't actually give a damn about anything you have to say."

For a second, Freddie's expression twists with something dark, ugly. She smooths it into a pretty, vicious smile with admirable quickness. "I'm gonna nail your ass to the wall if it's the last thing I do."

Will huffs a laugh and swallows hard. Part of him would love to push her just to see her fall. He digs his nails into his hands instead and shrugs. "Sorry," he says. "I have a boyfriend."

Her grimace is the last thing he sees before he turns and ascends, the click of his heels loud on the tile, pride purring inside the cage of his ribs. It's almost loud enough to drown out the memory of sirens.

The hospital is still busy when Hannibal arrives to work. Dealing with the aftermath of the accident and the influx of crash victims is a full-time job and then some for all staff on hand. Though he generally prefers the days when he's busy with surgery to pass the time, after the last twenty-four hours, Hannibal finds himself tiring more quickly than normal. The remainder of the heart he has brought for his dinner is not nearly as flavorful without the time to savor it properly. Hannibal ruminates on the matter in the hospital break room, frowning down at his meal with a truly shocking amount of inattentiveness.

"Deep thoughts, Doc?"

Hannibal glances up. Abel Gideon is rinsing a tupperware container in the sink. They've been colleagues for some time, though don't often converse; he's an intelligent man, an accomplished surgeon. Hannibal notes the dark circles under his eyes and suspects that Gideon, like him, has been working extra hours to deal with the overflow of trauma patients. "Not particularly," Hannibal replies with a slight, polite tilt of his lips. "Simply enjoying the quiet while it lasts."

Gideon laughs under his breath. "I hear that. Seems like the only quiet I get lately is here." He huffs, tears a paper towel from the dispenser, and wipes the water from his container. "You got a wife?"

Hannibal's brows creep upward. Ambivalent silence to discussion of their home lives? And from the topic of conversation, Hannibal's warning instincts are piqued. "I'm afraid not."

"Afraid not? Count your blessings," Gideon replies. He turns around and leans back against the counter. Hannibal's fingers curl around the handle of his fork. He has never felt uncomfortable in the

emergency department's break room before; it is often occupied by exhausted nurses, doctors eating as quickly as possible to return to their stations. It's not uncommon to be the only one present, or to not exchange a word with a single soul there. This happenstance is unusual. "Free advice: if you value your silence, don't get married."

Hannibal's expression remains neutral through virtue of practice alone. "I'll keep that in mind."

Gideon nods. He rubs a hand over his face. "Nothin' quite like getting home from a day like yesterday and getting yelled at by someone who faints at the sight of blood."

Intrigue picks at the edges of Hannibal's mind. An unhappy home life? He wouldn't have supposed that of Gideon. And that aside, there is something else he can't quite put his finger on—some signal from his instincts. He is unaware of its exact purpose, but he is not one to ignore the signs given to him by his superior mind. These things usually have purpose. For that reason, he schools his voice into one of polite understanding and offers a faint nod. "That must be difficult."

"All the more reason to pick up extra hours." Gideon exhales through his nose. He's not an unattractive man; stocky, perhaps, but fairly young. If he's really so unhappy, Hannibal is sure he would have another chance at satisfaction if he were to leave his current circumstances—though far be it from his place to say so.

Hannibal taps his fork thoughtfully against the glass, then lifts it free. He replaces the locking lid on the dregs of his dinner, perhaps to be attempted again when his shift is over. No use in wasting perfectly good meat on a lacklustre appetite. "Do you have children at home, Doctor Gideon?"

He smiles wryly. "Abel, please. And no, thank God, I don't."

Religious man, or turn of phrase? Hannibal inclines his head. "Hannibal, then," he replies. He considers his wording carefully. "Perhaps a hobby away from home would spare you the stressors of excess work and the undue criticisms of your spouse."

Gideon barks a laugh. His face lights up, eyes crinkling at the corners. It removes years from his appearance. "That's the politest anyone's ever told me to get a life before."

Hannibal frowns faintly. "I meant no offense."

Gideon snickers to himself, bites down on a smile. "I'm not offended. You're not wrong." He crumples the wet paper towel in his hand and tosses it into the open bin with surprisingly good aim. "And you're not the first to say it. I used to be something of a musician. Now I only go to performances."

More intrigue. "Hospital hours can make attending the symphony difficult."

Gideon blinks, then lights up. "You're tellin' me. You play?"

A smile tilts Hannibal's mouth. "The harpsichord, among others. And you?"

"Trombone. I like to think if I ever quit my day job, I could take over Wilson's chair."

Hannibal restrains a laugh. It's certainly no secret that the symphony's second chair could use replacing with some urgency. He's even considered dispatching the man himself, if not for the fact that his last victim had ties to the symphony already. He can't be seen going about and developing a pattern. Still, Hannibal nods in approval, tips his head in the suggestion of something not quite

impolite, but not quite kind—an exchange of words open for interpretation. “That may be a blessing to those in the audience.”

Gideon is free with his amusement. His eyes are sharp, shining. In them, Hannibal sees someone not unlike himself, though Gideon’s killer instincts are not yet honed. He may yet stay on the path of the straight and narrow.

And yet.

Hannibal leans back slightly in the uncomfortable cafeteria chair. “Will you be attending the charity gala?”

Gideon raises his brows. “Wouldn’t miss it. You going?”

“I plan on it, yes. Perhaps I will see you there.” It will be interesting to see how Gideon fits into the social structure of the Baltimore elites outside of the hospital walls. Hannibal is a patron of the arts, yes—but the more people he knows who attend an event such as this, the more he finds he has to learn from it. “And your wife.”

A flicker passes over Gideon’s features. He maintains an impressively genial poker face, and gracefully sidesteps Hannibal’s remark with a joke. “Bringing one of the nurses?”

Hannibal offers a practiced grimace that sets Gideon to laughing again, and shakes his head. “No, nothing like that. I’ve started seeing someone recently; they’ll be attending with me.”

Gideon’s brows raise with interest. He whistles between his teeth. “Must be one hell of a date.” Something passes through his face; his brow crinkles in thought, and then he snaps his fingers in recognition. “Wait a minute. Ten-seventeen, last month. You were the attending on that pretty little thing—what was his name? Friends with Katz down in the blood lab. Sharp as a tack, hell of an attitude.”

Something tightens unpleasantly in Hannibal’s chest. He shifts in place, feels the flickerings of cold intent in his bones. Slowly, deliberately, he tilts his head to the side and assumes a curious expression. “You know Will?”

“*Will,* yes, that’s the one.” Gideon nods decisively. “I set his cast after you got called away. He spoke highly of you.” Hannibal blinks; the unpleasant sensation is temporarily soothed, but his wariness remains. Gideon’s grin stretches, wide and knowing. He hums with amused consideration. “You know, I *thought* I saw him around again.”

“Will’s stopped in to visit once or twice,” Hannibal replies. He tracks Gideon’s movements, tries to get a read on him. Flattery does tend to go a long way with doctors. “I wasn’t aware who treated him after I left. Thank you for the care you showed him with your expertise; he’s recovering well.”

“Glad to hear it, glad to hear it.” Gideon nods easily. That thread of amusement in his expression doesn’t fade. “Gotta admit I’m surprised; he’s a little young, but I can’t say I blame you. Kid’s a spitfire.” Before Hannibal can summon irritation or rebuttal, Gideon’s expression creases with a frown, a flash of something in his gaze that is there and gone again. “He had a Virginia address, right? He wasn’t tangled up in the mess on the 495 yesterday, was he?”

Interesting. Gideon has a particularly keen memory. Hannibal shakes his head again, allows his shoulders to relax in the approximation of relief and weariness. “No, thankfully.” He knows Bernadette will say no differently, loyal as she is, what with her protective fondness for Will. But

surely she is not the only one who had seen him. “But he came here last night to visit after my shift. When cell service went down, and with how busy we were, I was…” Hannibal frowns at the unpleasant memory of deep uncertainty. He searches for a word that is both performative and accurate.

“Natural to be worried,” Gideon says. “Good of him to stop by. Glad he’s alright. Shit like that definitely makes you think, that’s for sure.”

Hannibal’s brow furrows. This time, it is not a choice. “Yes, it does.”

Gideon sighs, both wistful and weary. His spine curves as he stretches, rolls his shoulders and his neck. He taps his tupperware against his open palm. “Well, back to the ol’ grind. Good chat. Godspeed for the rest of your shift, of course.”

Hannibal nods. “And to you.”

Gideon goes, humming to himself as he does; some jovial tune that sounds faintly jazzy. Hannibal is left alone in the break room with only his thoughts as company.

Worry. It is not a sensation he would usually ascribe to himself, but now that it has been spoken aloud, it feels like its existence is tangible in his memory. He was worried for Will, his well being. More than irritation or passing fascination, but genuine concern. He has grown so used to a solitary existence that the realization he is no longer alone is something of a surprise. The nature of it has crept up on him, unexpected. Unbidden. And now that it has dawned on him, he cannot seem to shake it.

This bridge he is building will go both ways. If he has his way, he will be tied to Will Graham for the remainder of his life, and Will to him. There will be no other. He *wants* no other.

Will’s declaration of fealty and family was not one-sided.

Hannibal’s eyes linger on his sealed food. He stands, and places his food back into his insulated bag, then heads for his locker. Time is limited; he only has until the next emergency begins, but perhaps he will have time enough. When his food is safely stored inside it, he unbuckles his go bag and pulls out his phone. He’d left it on, but silent, rather than turning it off. It’s unlike him. Everything is unlike him now that he holds the expectation of Will reaching out to him in return.

But evolution is necessary to sustained life. Will’s introduction to *his* life has forced him to adapt. There is no shame in that, he tells himself as he pulls up Will’s contact. There is strength in numbers for both predators and prey.

Hannibal leans back against the lockers; focuses solely on the ringing in his ear, the keen anticipation of Will’s voice. He does not disappoint.

“Hannibal,” Will sighs, like his name alone is sweet relief. *“Hi.”*

But it’s a relief they share.

“Hello, Will.”

In the darkness of his lonely living room, Will dreams.

The day of the crash has not left him. If possible, with distance from the event and from Hannibal, it's grown more vivid. Blood and viscera. Oil. Fire. Screams. The Hanged Man sways gently from the overpass, a mockery of tenderness in contrast to the polished bone of his skull, the hole in his chest. The world shifts, tilts, freezes.

Will's gaze lifts. Sitting on the edge of the overpass is a woman who looks like him. Her feet swing in the open air, glossy black heels with blood red soles that drip down onto the carnage below. She is draped artfully in a red gown, delicate with floral-patterned beading and a plunging neckline, a voluminous skirt slit high up her thigh. She glitters under the memory of morning sunlight, decadent and lovely.

Her bare legs are wrapped in bandage from knees to ankles.

"What is it about this one?" Wilhelmina asks. Despite her distance, Will has no problems hearing her clearly. Then again, he has never had a problem hearing her.

He stands below on frozen tarmac, barefoot in shattered glass, and realizes the blood that drips from the soles of her shoes is the same blood that drips from the soles of his feet. She wears the destruction like finery, but Will is the one who will bear the scars. "I'm missing something."

She tips her head to the side, and her loose curls tumble over her shoulder. She smiles at him indulgently and with terrible fondness. "No one understands him like we do."

Will takes a breath. It echoes in the stillness. Her shoes tap together as they dangle but never fall, and he can't help the sardonic flicker of awareness that he's not in Louisiana anymore. There's no physical evidence. There are no papers to be written about how time of death conflates with the evidence when there *is* no evidence. There will be no clicking his heels and being transported to a land far away, back to ten years old studying dead fish on the riverbank while his father hauls catches from the docks.

There is only here and now, and the knowledge that the great and powerful wizard he is searching for has sole custody of Will's heart and mind and courage and *home*.

"I don't understand this," Will says.

Then he, too, is sitting atop the overpass. They wear the same red lace and chiffon, the same extravagant Louboutins. She leans forward without a care in the world, elbows on her battered knees. She is starting to bleed through the bandages, and doesn't even seem to notice. "Yes you do," she says. She turns toward him and smiles with joy in her eyes and a carnivore's fangs in her mouth. "What comes after death?"

Philosophy? Will frowns. He doesn't know.

When he shakes his head, she sighs. "Yes, you do. It's what he *wants.* What comes after death?"

"I don't *know,*" he snaps.

She frowns. Will is flooded with the knowledge that he has somehow disappointed her. In an instant, he is on the ground. She towers high above him, alluring and distant as Helen—ready to wage war in her own name, prepared to launch a thousand ships for the sake of her pride. "Then you're not paying attention."

“To *what?* ” Will asks desperately. “I’m *looking.* I *want* to find him,” his dream-self says, though he knows in his heart he’s terrified. They both know of whom he speaks. Here, despite any and all sense and kindness, there has never been any other *him*. “But I know he’s going to find me first.”

“*Yes.* ” Her smile is vicious, but her lashes flutter with affection, satisfaction. Love. “Will you be ready?”

Surrounded by wrecked cars, with bleeding feet, he’s half-demolished—his world is crumbling. No, Will’s not sure he’ll be ready at all. He wants to keep an excess of time in a lockbox. He wants to hoard a limitless supply of warmth and affection, secret smiles, sleepy kisses. He wants Hannibal. He wants to be selfish.

And at the same time, he wants blood. He wants justice for the suffering he’s faced, the lonely nights, the aching void inside his heart that has longed to be filled by an equal. Someone who can see and *know* the way he does. He wants to stand in austere halls and feel the vibrations of stars through chapel windows. He wants to see the flow of life spill across ancient marble floors. He wants to see flesh transformed, bear witness to history heightened from the vessels of unimportant men, sinners who dared to place their worth above the might of gods who walk the earth.

He wants both. He knows he cannot have both.

“I don’t want to die,” he whispers, but he knows she hears him, because she always does.

Wilhelmina inclines her head. She stares down at him like he’s hopelessly naive. “What comes after death?”

Fury builds within his breast. Doesn’t she understand? He doesn’t *know.* All he is certain of is that death is coming for *him.* The world starts to move again in a screech to deafen the ages—screams, sirens, Will stands at the center and weathers it all in the name of staring her down. He stands in his blood-soaked clothes, his father’s jacket, his heeled boots, Margot’s hand-me-down sweater, and snarls up at her. She remains above, a queen holding court.

Her eyes light up from the inside and burn red. She’s so fucking magazine-perfect, so beautiful it hurts—and yet, Will cannot imagine being her. Not *really.* Part of him will always belong to the man who pulled him from the wreckage of his solitary life.

He is neither. He is both.

“Now you’re getting it,” she says. Nods once with approval.

And she plunges her hand into her own chest. She does not wince or gasp or scream as she tears out her own heart and holds it in her hand. It beats with the remnants of life, pulsing blood over and between her fingers. It darkens her dress, her chest, and leaves an empty hole inside, so raw with gore it is nearly purple.

Their eyes lock as she lifts it to her mouth.

She bites.

Soaked in sweat, gasping for breath, shaken to his core, Will is wrenched from the world of dreams and nightmares and whispers, “He’s eating them.”

Chapter End Notes

please feel free to share on tumblr if you enjoyed! :D

2:2

Chapter Notes

> Thank you so much for all the comments on the last chapter! Memorial Day hell week is now over at work, and with the exception of needing to crunch on some zine pieces for my other fandom, things should get a LITTLE calmer around here;;;; Every time I think I know exactly what I need to write, my characters like to drag it out. Which is great for you guys, and not so great for my fingers. In any case, hope you enjoy this longer chapter. XD

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's been two days since Will's nightmare revelation. In that time, he has been desperately, frantically busy going back over the details of every Ripper case. Though he knows and feels with certainty that his insight on the Ripper's cannibalistic nature is true, he needs evidence. And given the killer he's hunting, Will knows he's looking for forensic evidence that doesn't exist—at the very least, nothing he can confirm without finding the man and asking directly.

And that's just the damn problem, isn't it? *Finding* him.

He has always known that the Ripper was an apex predator. When Will had first stepped foot into Baltimore as a teenager, he had witnessed the fear and respect the Ripper's presence has inspired. He's a man of culture, of class—intelligent, thorough, commanding attention from news crews and law enforcement and the public. He's no garden-variety killer preying on high-risk victims. He's better than that.

And he'd captured Will's attention. Enough for Will to shift his focus away from the disappointment of being pigeonholed by the Criminal Justice Academy and the psychology department at Johns Hopkins alike. Taking the hit to his transferable credits had been worth the opportunity to change his major, start over. Worse things had happened than transferring into Merrill as a sophomore instead of a junior.

In the years since, Will has dedicated himself to the pursuit.

In his own way, the Chesapeake Ripper was what led Will to Hannibal. Will tries to remember that fact when the guilt eats away at his conscience—when he sits in his car in front of his house and lies via text message, says he needs time to focus on school instead of admitting that he's going on a research bender, about to blow off the only person who really gives a damn about him. Will is not accustomed to feeling guilty. He lives a solitary life, makes his own decisions, and has no one to answer to. He's been that way since his father died. Even preferred it, somehow, to the days when Beau had been alive. Though Will likes to think that Hannibal would understand his need to take this time for himself, humans are rarely so rational. Schoolwork is one thing. Chasing a murderer is another.

And Will *is* chasing. Chasing his fucking tail, chasing dead ends, coming up with nothing more than he'd started with. He has eight bodies displayed like art installations, missing organs, left everywhere from Baltimore to the Beltway. Men, women, young, old, different races, different body types.

Will has no idea how he's choosing them. He only knows that the Ripper is eating them.

He needs to tell someone. He can't tell anyone. All over again, the Ripper is the cause for his secrets, and the pursuit of him is the reason Will must keep them. How many secrets will they share by the time Will catches up, he wonders? How much will be held in confidence between them by the time one finds the other? Now that Will sees the truth, he can't let it go. He can't stop making a list in his head of the organs taken—livers, kidneys, intestines, lungs, heart. Offal. Edible.

The descriptor of *sounders* has never seemed so apt. It is not, Will supposes, a far leap for a killer to go from *predator* to *carnivore.*

Artist. Murderer. Carnivore. Cannibal.

And Will is a glutton for punishment.

Dread is thick inside his chest as he gets off the Beltway and takes the back roads. The residential neighborhood is quiet. Quaint. It's the kind of place he can hardly imagine the Ripper setting foot in—children play in front yards, watched by the haunted eyes of their parents who understand the horror this week has brought, encroached upon the place they felt safe. It's the kind of development where no one is up past ten at night, let alone the early hours of the morning. No traffic cameras. No witnesses. Nothing.

Will pulls over and parks his car.

There is a sidewalk on one side of the road, closed off to the public with caution tape and nothing else. There are no officers stationed nearby to enforce it. They surely collected everything they needed for evidence within hours of the crash, but Will is thankful for the barricades as he ducks under them—no one who lives here will dare to ignore them, and anyone who sees him will believe he belongs.

Right now, Will's not sure where he belongs. He's not even sure he belongs in his own skin.

Over the years, being Wilhelmina—or, at least *pretending* to be Wilhelmina—has given him a sense of direction. There's enjoyment to be found in nice things. There is comfort in the routine of putting himself inside her clothing, inside her shoes, folding himself up in her mind and zipping himself inside. Over time, her wardrobe has become his armor. Her mindset is separate but similar. When he becomes her, it's just enough for Will to shed his uncertainties. To feel strength in all his soft places, rather than being exposed, uncovered, unprotected.

The cuts and bruises on his legs have turned into an ugly mash of green and yellow, sealed beneath new bandages, but aching all the same. Will has decided upon mercy for himself and worn his old jeans, baggy in the legs and ass; flannel lined, comfortable to a fault. It's been some time since he wore them in public. The green plaid shirt is soft against his skin, the very same he'd worn the night he met Hannibal. Will is stripped down to his base blocks, clad in ill-fitting clothes and worn-in work boots.

But here, like this, he is raw—hair thrown up in a careless knot, glasses perched upon his nose, clean-shaven but not concealed, undiluted yet undefined.

The departure from his more streamlined appearance is both comforting and unsettling. At the very least, the presence of Hannibal's coat is a reminder that his safety matters to someone. That he is wanted. That if the Ripper were to walk up behind him right now and Will was never seen again, he would be missed—or, at the very least, the version of him that is a version of Wilhelmina would be missed.

But following her presence in his dreams, Will now feels the distinct and naked sensation of being alone inside his mind. She is quiet today, leaving Will to his own devices.

And his devices have brought him here.

The wind whips through the unprotected bridge and chills him to the bone. Will stands on the overpass from which The Hanged Man was suspended and looks down over the Beltway. Cars and trucks scream by, going well above the speed limit. Will doesn't even try to count them; in retrospect, it's a miracle that only thirty-seven were involved in the pile-up. Hundreds, if not *thousands* of vehicles pass beneath this bridge every minute. It could have been worse. So much worse.

But at the time, what it was seemed bad enough.

There's a short chain-link fence that lines either side of the concrete bridge—a safety precaution for children, but no deterrent to any dedicated adult. It can't be any higher than five feet, though the sidewalk side bears a protective inward arch that could be a deterrent to anyone looking to climb. It says something that the Ripper suspended the body from this side, instead of the other where it would have been easier to haul the body up and over. In order to set the scene he envisioned, the Ripper took the time to overcome the inconvenience.

Common sense says controlling. But the inner workings of Will's head whispers *stubborn* with such terrible fondness that Will can't help but be affected. He's been following these tracks for so long—surely it's at least a little justified to feel vindicated at *finally* being noticed? Eighteen months of following the Ripper, analyzing his movements, reading his scenes and getting to know him.

If Wilhelmina stands directly at Will's right side, then surely the Chesapeake Ripper stands at his left. He has been a constant companion through Will's days and nights; in nightmares, too, at least Will has not been alone. The Ripper's presence is heavy, a weighted blanket bearing Will down and keeping his feet flat on the earth. Even now, the Ripper stands beside him. In the absence of the man himself, Will is left with his photo negative—a dark silhouette, tall and broad, ominous as an old and unknown god.

What is it the Ripper wants from him?

To devour him, maybe. Will wouldn't be surprised. The Ripper has never seemed like the kind of person who wanted a companion or wanted to be known. Maybe Will has crossed the line with *Analysis,* wiped away the mystery that the Ripper wanted to maintain. And because of it, Will can't imagine publicizing what he now knows. The terrible truth of the Ripper's consumption feels like a secret between them, between Will and this shadow man who sees him as thoroughly as Will sees in return.

WIll ducks his head, loses himself in the sound of the cars below. Perhaps it's insanity to feel he can't betray the trust of someone who may very well want to kill him, but Will has never claimed to be sane.

Sometimes he thinks the Ripper might be more sane than he is.

“Hey!” Someone shouts, and Will’s head snaps up at the alarmed and irritated sound of a woman’s voice. “You’re not supposed to be up here!”

He turns and freezes. They recognize each other immediately. It’s the blonde-haired cop who had distracted her fellow officers while Will was in rescue-mode. Will can honestly say he never expected to see her again, let alone like this—Will intruding onto a closed crime scene, with her placed solidly between him and his car, his only means of escape.

Goddamn it.

The stubborn set of her jaw and shoulders slackens some—her eyes flicker up and down. Will knows he looks different than he had on the day of the crash, but it’s obviously close enough for her to remember him. If he’d known she’d be here, he wouldn’t have come in person. He would have relived it within the safe and people-free barricades of his mind. This complicates things: after all, Will had never given a police statement. He had escaped the incident without going on record. But with her here now, and with his car parked so conveniently nearby, waiting with his name registered on the title, she could have him. If she so wants to, she can turn him in, have him questioned, could get a warrant for his phone, and all of this would be over. The article for *Analysis* would be traced back to him, and the Caldwell article to Hannibal and Johns Hopkins.

Will can’t fail Hannibal like that. He can’t.

And it is with that thought in mind that he finds his center, relaxes his shoulders, and breathes deeply until his muscles slacken. Wilhelmina is nowhere to be found. Will is on his own.

He knows he’s been recognized. But he can use that to his advantage.

“I, um,” Will says softly, and averts his eyes to her prying gaze. He can see her surprise, her curiosity as she draws closer. He shifts his weight from side to side. “Sorry. I know I shouldn’t have come.”

She stares at him from the other side of the police line. It is with a heavy sigh that she bends underneath it and approaches.The sleeve of her uniform blues reads *Montgomery County Police Dept.* in golden thread, shifting as she tucks her hands into her pockets. To some extent, Will relaxes. If he was going to be arrested, she’d have her cuffs out. “No, you shouldn’t have,” she says. She steps up onto the sidewalk, looks down at the cars below. “But I know why you did.”

She’s petite but fit, with her hair pulled into a tight ponytail. She can’t be much older than Will, if she is at all. No makeup. No nonsense. Will likes her already. They have the same mentality, just expressed in different ways. He uses his routine to imbue strength. She uses her lack of one for the same.

“If you do, you’ve got a better idea than me,” Will says. Let her think that he is lost and looking for existential answers. He’s not. He’s just looking for the Ripper.

She leans her hip against the concrete barricade, her shoulder against the chain-link fence. She doesn’t hold out a hand for him to shake, and Will’s glad for it. “Miriam Lass.”

Will nods once in acknowledgement. He takes a slow breath and lets it out. “Are you planning on bringing me in? Because if you are, I don’t really think I want to tell you my name.”

“Bold to assume I didn’t already run your plate,” she says, but with a hint of good humor. “No, I’m not going to bring you in. I’m off shift.”

Will glances backward—indeed, the car parked behind his is not a police cruiser, but a beat-up old sedan, faded gray and mottled with rust spots. “Huh.” He frowns down at a passing semi, and gives her a sidelong glance. She meets his eyes and quirks a brow. “So why *are* you here?”

“Same as you. Can’t get it out of my head.” She sighs. Her breath shudders. Will can feel the horror lingering in her lungs, grasping the inside of her throat and ready to escape as a scream. He feels much the same. “You saved a lot of lives. If you stepped forward, they’d call you a hero.”

Will shrugs, uncomfortable with the idea of so much attention, of the expectations and publicity. He prefers the quiet. That’s why *Analysis* is and always has been anonymous. “Not why I did it.”

“Yeah, I know.” Will shoots her a look, and she replies with a wry laugh, “Never seen anyone run into someone else’s wreck while wearing heels because they wanted the attention.”

Will grimaces. Yeah, for good reason. He’d probably have fared better in the boots he wears now, but the time for that is long past over and done. He hopes like hell he’ll never run into anything like it again, or maybe he’d start carrying a more sensible pair of shoes in his car. Maybe he will anyway.

Will looks straight down over the edge. He watches the cars pass. She stands beside him in silence until he figures out what to say. “Had to do something.”

“You’re a helper.” She, too, shrugs. “Helpers help. Doesn’t matter where or why. They just do. At least, Mister Rogers says so.”

That draws a startled bark of laughter from Will. He looks at her and sees her smiling. She’s pretty, in a simple sort of way. A hometown girl. Even with the dark circles under her eyes from sleepless nights, he can see it shining inside her. She’s a good person. Smart. She meets his eyes, and he makes a calculated decision. “I’m Will.”

“Good to meet you.”

“Yeah, you too.” Will rolls his shoulders back and thinks. He could pass this off as the impulse of a wistful mind, never return again. He thinks she’d probably let him go if he spouted some line about closure, offered her a sad smile, and beat a hasty retreat. It would be the wise thing to do. It would keep his cover.

But it won’t get him anywhere but back in his own car, doomed to the limitations of a missed opportunity. It will only get him further away from what he seeks. Right now he is standing where the Ripper stood, and it’s like standing in the footsteps of Lucifer—living in the memory of the most beautiful destruction the world has to offer. Will can never catch up if he only ever gives chase. Sooner or later, he’ll have to start trying to get ahead.

This officer—*Miriam*—is Montgomery County PD. Bethesda. Local. First on the scene, not a handful of miles up the road. The tense lines of her face and lavender hollows of her eyes say that this place weighs heavily on her. Will senses that’s not for nothing.

Maybe he can use her knowledge. Maybe he can offer her something in return. Quid pro quo.

“There’s no evidence,” Will says. “Right? He never leaves evidence. No witnesses. Nothing.”

There is a stretch of silence punctuated only by the sound of wheels. Will turns his head and sees her rigid form, sees her complicated expression. He knows he’s right. Of course he does. He knows who did this. They both do. But now she knows he knows.

“I came up here to stand where he stood,” Will admits. “To look down there and see it from this perspective. *His* perspective. It feels a little like being God.” He inhales deeply through his nose; even at midday, the cold air stings his lungs. There’s still the faint scent of oil, stains sunken into the pavement below. Runoff from this accident will be polluting the ground for months, years. Long after the horror of it fades from the minds of normal, decent people, the earth will remember the one and only time the Ripper made a mistake. What is that if not divinity?

Miriam’s voice goes cold and hard. “The killer’s not God. He’s just a man.”

Will shrugs, rolls his neck. Removes his glasses. Folds them and hooks them over the collar of Hannibal’s coat, and squints at the subtle strain of his eye muscles. “Then understanding his perspective is even more important. The *what* and *where* lead to *how. How* leads to *why. Why* leads to *who.*” Will exhales through his nose, catches the sharp look she gives him, and meets it with a grim stare in return. He is balanced on the edge of getting arrested after all, and getting the intel he so desperately needs. He gestures at the Beltway below. “I know where. I know what—mostly.”

Miriam stands up straight. She squares her shoulders, and a stubborn glint makes itself known in her eyes. Despite her fitness, she’s smaller than Will; he could be dangerous to her if he wanted to be, and he sees her sizing him up. He knows he’s less likely to get what he wants if she sees him as a threat.

Will holds up his hands palm-up in a placating gesture. He makes sure she sees his scraped skin, his splint; he relaxes right along with her, when she sees his perceived weaknesses and writes him off. But she returns right back to suspicion. Will admires that. “Who the hell are you?”

“No one,” Will says. At her disbelieving glance he says, “Really, I’m not. I’m just a student. My ID’s in my car.”

Miriam squints suspiciously. “Psychology?”

Will shakes his head. “Wanted to, but no.” He shoves his hands in his pockets and resists the urge to shudder at the bitter wind. “People like me don’t study, we *get* studied.” Miriam stares at him in silence. Will knows if he gives no quarter, he’ll gain no trust. With a sigh hissing through his teeth and anxiety clenching around his heart, he says, “Journalism.”

A grimace—Will feels the easy peace fading with her disdain. “So you want the glory of catching him.”

Will sneers in response. In an instant, the space between them is tense, and the sound of vehicles roaring by beneath the overpass is deafening. “It’s not my job to catch him, officer. That’s your job.”

Silence. A car horn. The scream of an engine. Breath.

“So what *do* you want?” she asks.

And Will replies, “To find him. And let you do what you will.”

More quiet. Her eyes are shrewd, calculating, knowing. “You’re the one who writes that website.”

Will’s lips purse. He’s on a delicate precipice in which plausible deniability may save them both someday. Best to deny it. “Not sure what you mean.”

“Cut the crap.”

They stare at each other. In the space of a heartbeat, Will reads her—her ambition, her drive, the practical ruthlessness that lives inside her. “You don’t care, Miriam. You just want to be the one to catch him.”

Miriam’s face tightens. She doesn’t like the implication that she doesn’t care. He’s sure she does—she just doesn’t care what *he* does, so long as he doesn’t interfere. “He needs to be caught.”

Will tilts his head ever so slightly to the side, measuring her. Weighing his options. Right now, his options are limited, but not altogether bad. “If you give me the intel, I’ll give you my insight.”

“What’s in it for you?”

“I live,” Will replies. That doesn’t even take any thought. Living in this situation would be ideal. Anything else is a bonus, aside from—“And I find him.”

“Why do you care?”

“About living? Thought it was obvious.”

“You know what I mean.”

It’s a simple question. One to which Will does not have a concrete answer. “Because…” he falters. How can he explain a fascination like this? How can he justify it in such a way that she doesn’t immediately write him off as crazy, hopeless, or dangerous? Perhaps it’s best to downplay. To not explain at all.

(But maybe Will can’t even explain it himself.)

Miriam’s eyes are piercing. She doesn’t so much look at him as look *through* him. She reads people well, though he supposes in her career path, that’s likely a necessary skill with the added benefit of keeping her alive. In Will’s case, it might be what gets him killed.

“There’s a place in my head where the Ripper fits. If he’s not there, it’s just empty.” Will feels the roughness of the cold concrete against his fingertips as he touches the barricade. He wonders what the rope that suspended The Hanged Man was made from. Would it be polyester, rough, entirely common? Or would it be rare, like silk?

When the Ripper catches up to him, how will he take Will apart?

“Don’t you think that’s better than filling yourself up with death? If you keep going like that, you won’t have room for anything else.”

It feels like a slap. Will stares at her with wide eyes, seeing the flicker of her awareness that she’s stung him, and the tendril of regret for it. But she doesn’t take it back. And she shouldn’t.

She’s right.

If Will was smart, he’d cut and run. He’d stop chasing the Ripper, stop writing his articles. Sell the house. Move somewhere else. Finish his degree online. He’s leading himself into the jaws of death, and quite literally so. If Will chases this lead to the end, he won’t come back the same—won’t come back at all.

“No,” Will replies, and the words are shards of glass spoken into existence, cutting him up from the inside out. “It’s not better. What I’m doing is all I know. Without it, what do I have left?”

She doesn’t answer. He doesn’t need her to. The moment he asks the question, he knows.

Hannibal. He’d have Hannibal.

But he wouldn’t be enough.

The realization is a knife to the chest, a bitter blade that slices a hole the size of a man’s palm and perfectly excises his heart.

Will laughs to himself but it sounds like a sob, and looks away from the road. He looks at their cars, two old models in similar states of function but disrepair. It’s not so dissimilar from how he feels—worn down, but serving his sole purpose in chasing the Ripper. When he sees her, he sees the same. “Our paths are aligned, Officer Lass. If we work together, maybe we can both get what we want.”

Miriam blinks. Purses her lips in consideration. “Maybe we can.”

They stare at each other. The silence stretches.

It is broken by the *ping* of Will’s cell phone, and the subsequent frown that draws together Miriam’s brows. Will sighs as he pulls his mobile from his pocket; he expects a text, or maybe an email. What he finds instead makes him freeze.

“I take it back. Maybe you should arrest me,” Will says. His heart thunders inside his ribs, in his throat, and his hand starts to shake as he drags it over his face. Sentimental rage works its way through his veins, and it hurts. The last thing Will sees is Miriam’s look of alarm before he closes his eyes. Exhales through his teeth. “I’m going to kill him.”

It’s been two days since the last time he saw or spoke to Will. Hannibal knows better than to think he’s taking it particularly well. The distance is wearing on him, the ineptitude of everything from passing drivers in morning traffic to the family members of his patients—the desire for yet another display to bring Will back to him again, despite his perfectly respectable and apologetic request for time to catch up on his schoolwork.

He knows it is unreasonable. He is strong enough to resist it. But it itches at his mind all the same.

And it has side effects. Namely, impulsivity. In a moment of weakness, he draws Will’s blank, folded check from where he’d hidden it in his desk drawer and surveys it. Notes the routing and account number. And in his medical records, Will’s permanent address and social security number.

Will had never clarified whether the hitch in his advertising revenue had ever been resolved. If he had mentioned it, Hannibal thinks, then ensuring his financial security wouldn’t be necessary.

It is with keen anticipation of the consequences that Hannibal transfers five thousand dollars into Will’s savings, then shuts off his phone.

After that, it’s only a matter of time.

Surgeries, breaks, scrubbing up. More surgeries. It's almost laughable how routine his days have gotten now that he knows what the alternative feels like. Hannibal is a man of action, and despite the sense of godlike power that some doctors boast of, the glory and gore of it all is starting to fade. Most patients he saves, some he doesn't. He relishes the challenge, but the laser-focus fades the moment he steps out of the operating theater.

"Doctor Lecter," a nurse says as he pokes his head around the corner of the prep area. Yet another new hire, this one younger and more tired-looking than Bernadette has ever managed. "Someone here for you."

Hannibal smiles to himself. "I'll be just a moment." He dries his hands and looks up; frowns faintly when he notices the time. No, Will should be in class. He can't imagine Will skipping a lecture to drive to Baltimore in the middle of his day.

Well, yes he can. But he can similarly imagine Will sitting and stewing in silent anger, and he is more apt to believe the latter of his two preconceived notions. Which leaves the question of who, exactly, is waiting for him outside.

It is to a great deal of surprise that he finds her leaning against the doorway outside where she most certainly doesn't belong—tight jeans and heeled boots, a vee-necked blouse and an old leather jacket, and ringlets tied at the top of her head. She smells overwhelmingly of artificial vanilla, and Hannibal narrowly resists wrinkling his nose. He takes one look at her and sees the shadow of Will in her outfit, and knows that's not a coincidence. She's much too shrewd for that.

"Hello, Miss Lounds," Hannibal says with an arched brow. He cocks his head to the side at her solemn expression, and keeps in mind the less than favorable things Will has said about her. "To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?"

Freddie offers a sad little smile that is entirely disingenuous, and that Hannibal sees through in less than a second. Her eyes are too sharp, too focused on surveying him and sizing him up. What does she see when she looks at him, he wonders? Opportunity, surely—she sees it in a way that Will did not. "I was hoping to talk to you." Her eyes flicker up to the theater nurses shuffling out behind him. They are all too exhausted to pay them any mind, but Freddie adds, "Alone."

Hannibal will admit that he is curious—but, too, he has a part to play. He frowns, knowing very well she's not here for anything so benevolent when he says, "Is Will alright?"

Her teeth sink into her lower lip, eyes cast downward and glances up through her lashes. It's coquettish. Irritating. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about."

And then he catches sight of the bracelet around her wrist, tucked under her sleeve—emergency admissions. She is here under false pretenses. What emergency bay did she skitter off from? It's an expensive way to conduct an impromptu interrogation, though Hannibal has to admit he is somewhat impressed with her tenacity.

Hannibal allows his eyes to shift to hers as though he hasn't noticed it at all. No, he'll get more answers from someone like Freddie Lounds if she believes she is the smartest in the room. He weighs his options between allowing her to know the location of his office and having their conversation overheard, and decides that if she should ever try to return to break into his files, he has enough layers of security to deter her. "Very well," he says. "If you'd like to walk with me, my office is in this direction."

"Great," she says with a simpering smile. "Thank you so much, really. I appreciate it."

She trails along slowly behind him, an obvious encouragement for him to walk ahead. Instead, Hannibal matches her pace. He will keep her in view at all times. The fact that this seems to agitate her into a swifter pace only confirms her intent to be out of his line of sight. It's an incredibly subtle manipulation. He has to admit that if it wasn't for Will's warnings and their prior meeting, he might have been tempted to underestimate her. Fortunately, he knows better.

He unlocks his office door with his keycard and six-digit code that he makes a mental note to change once their meeting is over. He stands aside for Freddie to enter first, and sees her twitch when he elects to leave the door open. Good. Anything to set her off-kilter.

"It's kind of a private conversation," she hints. Her eyes flick toward the open doorway and back.

Hannibal offers a polite smile. "My apologies. I must be available to hear the PA system if I'm paged."

Freddie's replying smile is frozen, unwavering. Plastic. "No beeper?"

"The signal in the lower levels of the hospital is spotty, I'm afraid." Hannibal inclines his head as he rounds the desk and sits opposite her. "I've brought up my concerns multiple times, of course. But until the workaround is implemented, it's standard policy for all doctors on call." Freddie hums, neither agreeing nor disagreeing, though he knows she does not entirely believe him. As she shouldn't—a hospital like Johns Hopkins would never abide such a gap in communication coverage, especially for emergency staff, but she has no immediate way to confirm that knowledge. Hannibal folds his hands together on the desktop and leans forward. "What was it you wanted to talk about?"

At long last, her smile fades into something neutral, almost worried. She chews at her lip and lowers her eyes, rubs at the back of her neck in a gesture meant to convey nervous embarrassment. She's quite the actress. "Look," she says, "I'm sure you care about Will."

Hannibal's brows raise. "Very much."

There is a tightness around her eyes that meanders along the border of bitterness. "And I'm sure he cares about you in his own way." She pauses, lets the words sink in. If Hannibal were a lesser man, he might grow nervous—but he knows better than to allow Freddie Lounds to quantify his relationship with Will. What insight could she offer that Hannibal has not discovered himself? "But I've known Will for a long time." Overstatement. "And I think you should know that he's an extremely dedicated person." Obvious. "He has good instincts." Clearly. "But he uses his instincts to track down stories, no matter the cost."

Hannibal tilts his head to the side. He doesn't move otherwise. "Yes, I'm aware of Will's commitment to his education."

There is something that flashes across her face, like she thinks Hannibal is an idiot. But then she considers, carefully shrewd. "Will's been chasing a story about a killer."

Of course he is. But Hannibal is not about to say as much, and give Freddie the confirmation she's been looking for. Hannibal frowns, like this is news. "Is he?"

Freddie's hands fold in her lap. She stares at Hannibal like she can rip the secrets from his mind by sheer will alone. "Yes. The one who caused the accident yesterday on the Beltway. I'm sure you heard."

Hannibal's frown deepens. "Yes, I certainly heard. I was called in to assist." Slowly, Hannibal reclines in his seat. "And he's in pursuit of this killer, you say?"

Freddie nods, eyes backlit by cold curiosity. "Will's been obsessed with this murderer for as long as I've known him. He'd do anything to catch up to him." Her smile turns sympathetic, sweet. "Including lying to those who care about him. Taking advantage of them, if he thought it would get him what he needs." One finger touches her lips. "Will's the first person I ever heard call him the Chesapeake Ripper. And now it seems like everyone knows that name. It's quite the coincidence."

Hannibal carefully schools his expression. There is a strange sort of joy that comes from Freddie's assertions that Will is *obsessed* with his work. He's seen the fascination, surely—Will's interest in the Ripper was what had brought them together in the first place. But the thought of Will and *obsession* leaves a honeyed taste on his tongue, something to be savored and consumed. Enjoyed.

Obsession is an open flame, and Hannibal would gladly see it consume him and Will both.

But he doesn't show this train of thought. Instead, he allows himself to display a flash of discontent. Let her make of it what she will. "While it may be dangerous for Will to follow such a person, I'm not sure what you expect from me, Miss Lounds. He's a creature of free will and fierce independence. I would have him no other way."

"You don't find it suspicious?" Freddie asks. She leans forward, the collar of her shirt sagging and exposing a flash of her collarbone and ivory skin. It is a juvenile attempt to draw his attention. Such a lure may work on simple, unattached men, but Hannibal is far beyond that. It hadn't worked the first time, and it won't work now. She really does have so much to learn.

But then her smile spreads, and her head tilts, and she looks at him with such pitying condescension that Hannibal must resist the urge to snap her neck then and there.

"No offense, Doctor, since you're obviously successful and I'm sure you do very well for yourself. You're a catch. But Will Graham doesn't *do* relationships. Will *dates,* and he goes out with anyone who has information he needs, young or old, male or female." Her finger taps impatiently on her knee. "So you'll have to forgive my skepticism of him. But I thought you deserved to be warned, before Will takes whatever information he can get through his relationship with you and publicizes it. I just don't believe a good man deserves to be ruined for trusting a pretty face."

Perhaps Freddie *is* a skilled manipulator—but with her words, and not through the immature temptations she seeks to elicit with her wiles. Hannibal counts himself fortunate now for the conversations he's had with Will, for the insight into how lonely his companion really is.

The significance Freddie puts behind the word *dates*—Hannibal wonders how Will would categorize it. Meetings between friends, perhaps, willfully misinterpreted by her for the purpose of misleading him. No, Hannibal decides, he does not very much care for Freddie Lounds at all. Though far be it for him to end a life with such close ties to his own, and to Will's. But someday, perhaps. Someday.

"No, he does not," Hannibal says, and though it sounds like agreement with her sentiment, it could be nothing but the opposite.

Freddie meets his eyes. Then, slowly, she realizes. "You don't believe me."

"In the time I have known Will, I have never found him to be anything but genuine and caring." Hannibal allows the readable traces of expression to close off, become stoic. Let Freddie see him shutting her out. Let her be aware of how he doesn't appreciate the audacity of her questioning his

relationship. “I won’t lie to you, Miss Lounds. I’m aware of the rivalry you share with Will. And I’m quite aware of the website you run, and the information sourced from this hospital that you published upon it.” He sees Freddie’s expression pinch. Good. “I saw the scans of the autopsy report. I’m not sure how you came into possession of that knowledge—” Lie. “—but I know that if I reported you to my supervisors, you would not be allowed across our threshold again. Nor even, I think, in the case of an emergency, given your abuse of our trust.”

Hannibal nods knowingly at the hospital bracelet slipping from beneath her sleeve. Freddie scowls in a flash of lips and teeth, but her eyes are stricken when she looks up and sees Hannibal pinning her in place with the weight of his gaze.

“I find your conduct unspeakably discourteous,” Hannibal says with all the weight of a lord communicating a capital sentence. “And unethical, even for a student.”

“And what about Will’s ethics?” Freddie asks with a sneer. Her hands tighten on the arms of the chair. “Or, for that matter, your own? Do you make a habit of dating patients?”

Hannibal feels the lines of his forehead and the flesh around his eyes tighten with disdain. His back is rigid, locked in place to keep him anchored. “Will was never admitted to the hospital outside of the emergency room, and my treatment of him was taken over by another doctor when I was called away to surgery. He has never been my patient, and will never become my patient.” His teeth snap together as he imagines her flesh between his jaws.

Freddie’s smile is accusatory, poisonous. “And Will’s injuries, all those bumps and bruises—no comment, Doctor?” Her nails make an agitating *clickclickclickclick* against the metal armrests. “You know supplying a minor with alcohol is grounds for ethical review for *your* job.”

A vein throbs in his temple, shooting tension down to his toes. Hannibal forces a slow smile. Will would never reveal such a thing to someone like her, even by accident. She’s guessing, grasping at straws, making assumptions of circumstances from the constellations of Will’s injuries. “Whatever Will does with his own time before arriving at my home is his business.”

“How surprisingly cavalier of you.” Freddie huffs an irritated breath, a disbelieving laugh. She’s livid; he can see the fire inside her shining brightly, ready to destroy him, were he not made of stone. But the cruel curl of her lips promises her dedication to the attempt. “You’re protecting him.”

Hannibal raises his brows. “From slander and discriminatory bias? I certainly hope to.”

“Bullshit. You know what Graham’s doing. You know about his website. You probably gave him his intel.” She laughs incredulously. Her breath catches in her throat, and she stares at Hannibal. “You don’t care that he’s chasing the Ripper. You don’t care if he’s using you. You already know.” She covers her mouth, and her eyes narrow into sharp slits. Her fingers curl, nails biting into the soft skin of her face. In this moment, Hannibal dearly wishes they were his own. “He can’t possibly be that good of a lay. What does he have on you?”

There is no longer any *perhaps* about it. Someday, he will kill Freddie Lounds.

Hannibal feels the mask descend in full. His good humor is gone. He resists the urge to stand and tower over her, lest she interpret intimidation as guilt—but the desire is strong to make her aware of how inconsequential she is, and what a terrible transgression she has made against him. He can’t manage it to his standards at this moment, but the time will come. Hannibal folds his hands atop his desk and levels her with a piercing stare. The tone of his voice lowers to the sibilant warning hiss of a

great serpent, threatened and poised to strike. “Miss Lounds, I would ask that you listen to me very carefully.”

Freddie freezes in place. She is a butterfly pinned to a specimen box for his enjoyment. He wonders if she can yet feel the piercing pain. “Are you listening?” Hannibal asks.

She swallows, sets her jaw. “Yes.”

Hannibal leans forward. This office, this room, is his to command. This place is his territory, this hospital is his base, and he is well-respected here. She is no threat to him, and it seems only now that she is starting to realize how her bold accusations may immediately and with fervor come to haunt her. “I do not appreciate your insinuations about Will’s character, or my own. Whatever vendetta you have against Will, be it personal or professional, I would ask you keep it away from me in the future, and out of my place of work. If you continue to disregard patient privacy laws, I will have you arrested.” He tilts his head to the side. “I will be reporting this incident. If you continue to harass Will, I will see that he brings a lawsuit against you. You will be expelled from your school and excommunicated from your degree field. This type of behavior is utterly unacceptable in the adult world, and altogether unlawful.”

Freddie’s face slackens with shock and dismay. For a split second, he sees a flicker of her fear. It is the most powerful he has felt since he cornered the pharmaceutical representative following a drug deal; the most satisfied since he woke up with Will in his bed.

“I hope you will take this opportunity to learn and grow,” Hannibal says, and lifts his chin. He is prideful, victorious, and she has lost this headstrong amateur gambit to the patient workings of a master. They both know it. “And I hope that if we are to stumble upon each other again, it will be under more civilized terms.”

Freddie swallows hard. She looks so incredibly young, filled with anger and apprehension that knows no direction. Her fingers shake as she winds them together in her lap; her eyes are still bright with indignation.

And then she ducks her head. Her red lips part on a sneer and a laugh. “I’m going to prove it, you know.”

Hannibal disregards her. He lifts one hand and gestures calmly to the open doorway. “You may see yourself out. Don’t delay. I’ll give you five minutes before I call hospital security.”

Freddie stands. Then, with vitriol in her eyes, she dips low in a mocking curtsy, a sardonic *by your leave*. She excuses herself without another word. He gives her the time he promised, and not a moment more, before he returns to the emergency department. As expected, Freddie Lounds and all her belongings are gone.

Perhaps she is not so smart as she believes she is, Hannibal thinks, as he turns over her information and description to the security staff. He bites down on a smile, and maintains his carefully-sculpted expression of concern. It is entirely for the staff’s benefit; Hannibal could not possibly care less what personal information she comes across, so long as it is not his or Will’s.

He returns to the operating room with a strong sense of satisfaction. Though it will not be today or tomorrow, Hannibal will catch up to her.

Freddie Lounds left behind an address.

That is, however, the only vindication Hannibal receives. He works to the end of his shift without any further interruptions, and Will doesn’t come.

Chapter End Notes

rebloggable on tumblr and fear not, they'll be back together soon. :3c

2:3

Chapter Notes

I told you they'd be together again, didn't I? owo

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Not calling Will is a matter of pride.

It seems exceedingly unlikely that Will wouldn't have noticed the money transfer by now. Concerned though Hannibal may be, he has made his move. He is not going to retract it. Nor, it seems, is Will planning on addressing it. Hannibal turns his phone on as he climbs into the Bentley, but finds no angry text messages or scolding voicemails.

For a moment, he feels a flicker of worry. But there is no sense in allowing it to take over, and reaching out would be admitting defeat. It's best to leave these things alone and let the chips fall as they may. Will is bound to contact him sooner or later.

And if Will's rebuttal of choice proves to be the silent treatment, Hannibal will make himself impossible to ignore. He does know where Will lives. Or, he could always take the less-direct route and escalate. The money is no object to him. Depositing larger and larger sums would be a rare opportunity to test the boundaries of Will's irritable nature. He hasn't had the opportunity since before the accident. Needling Will's sensibilities would be a return to their earlier dynamic—normalcy, almost, if they truly know each other enough now to have a *normal.*

(And the idea of Will pink-cheeked and snarling is undeniably attractive.)

It is with Will in his mind that Hannibal arrives home to dark and empty halls. The hour is late, nearly midnight, but his mind is energized. Hannibal ascends the stairs to shower and change, to free himself from the smell of antiseptic and sterility of the hospital.

The master bedroom is dim before him, light filtering from the street lamps outside through the curtains. Crossing the threshold brings only the faintest lingering scent of Will, still folded into the threads of his bedsheets. The presence and absence in his bed was one he never thought to notice until Will was tucked in beside him, soft and trusting and radiating heat. The pale nape of his neck had glowed in the moonlight, begging for the impression of teeth; Hannibal had resisted from propriety alone. If fate should return them to such a time again, in the absence of trauma, they may be more free to interact as they wish. Mouths against mouths, skin against skin, Will's hand squeezing his so desperately in a scramble to stay anchored—this time without fear, without the looming shadow of death, though perhaps *not* without a trace of blood.

How is it that he has found himself searching the empty spaces in his home and imagining Will within them? Somehow, the time they shared together only seemed to absorb Will's imprint. It has left shadows of him on the walls, burned into the floors. The places he has touched hold traces of his memory. Hannibal, too, can feel the handprints Will has left upon his skin. Hannibal's fingers slide across his mattress, the silhouette of Will's sleeping body still present in the palace of his mind.

The Beltway had been close. Too close. Whatever display he arranges next will have to be more carefully thought out. He will take his time—consider it, craft it, plan more elaborately than he has since he started displaying his kills in the Chesapeake Bay basin.

His hand halts. Curls in the quilt, leaves a wrinkled impression that now mars the previously-perfect military-corners of his bedspread.

The Chesapeake Ripper.

Now that Will has named him, has claimed him, it is so easy to think of himself as *Will's* Chesapeake Ripper. A hint of irony clings to his mind whenever he calls the Ripper *your killer;* he has murmured it into Will's ear and received no denial, no disgust. It is not a suggestion, or an implication, but a strange and dangerous truth.

And just as he belongs to Will, Will belongs to him. Will is his for always, forever. Hannibal is going to keep him, tame him, *train* him. Take the raw edges of this precious, finite resource and mold Will into his most refined self. His most elegant shape. The most savagely beautiful killer. His perfect one, his only—mylimasis, beloved.

Already he can see the shape Will has begun to take beneath the ivory veil of his skin, spinning himself into a chrysalis of his own making. Chasing the Ripper, assuming his mindset, is good for them both. It keeps Hannibal on his toes, keeps Will alert and attentive. Though the desire is so strong to tell and share all, it's not time. Will must come to the realization on his own—ideally, unassisted. When the time comes, Hannibal has moderate confidence that Will's feelings for him will be enough to give him pause, to pin his morals in place for long enough to assess his conflicted feelings.

And it will be a conflict; Hannibal is sure of that. Will is of two minds—the male and female finding peace somewhere in the middle. It is common ground they share where Will is of *one* mind to care about Hannibal, and one mind to pursue his mark. Hunter and Huntress living inside one skin.

In that regard, it has never been a stretch to understand Will's mentality. It is one he shares.

Hannibal takes a slow breath, inhales the last dregs of Will's scent clinging to the corners of his bedroom. Soon enough, he tells himself. He only has to be patient, and Will is sure to return to him. With that in mind, Hannibal strips from his scrubs and places them in the hamper, then heads for the shower.

The diluted-pink puddles of Will's blood are long since scrubbed away, but Hannibal can still imagine the color on the tile. It's almost as good as the real thing, but not quite.

Though he would usually dress well for dinner, the late hour and long day demands something slightly more comfortable. Hannibal settles for soft but tailored lounge pants and one of his older gray button-downs, flexible and worn around the cuffs when he rolls them up around his forearms. He makes a mental note to put more effort in tomorrow; he should have plenty of time in the evening, once his co-opted shadowing of Frederick Chilton is over for the afternoon. A more elaborate menu, a trip to the organic market, and perhaps, if he is fortunate, Will might have decided to break his silence in time to be open to a dinner invitation.

The thought is satisfying, and Hannibal hums one of Chopin's nocturnes to himself as he descends the stairs, planning a menu in his mind. In the meantime, he sets about putting his day-old scrubs into the wash, donning his modest chef's apron, and prepping for a late dinner—a thawed and ten-hour sous vide section of loin from a snappy dental hygienist who had cut him off in traffic. He had never bothered to display her; as a runner, and a particularly lean woman at that, she had exceptionally prime cuts. It seemed such a waste to let her rot for the sake of pettiness, when simply allowing her to be forgotten was far more practical recompense.

All that's left is to crust the loin and sear it, then prepare some sort of vegetable; perhaps radishes and purple carrots shaved into a slaw with a lemon poppyseed vinaigrette. That leaves a grain—Hannibal debates the merits of a brioche crouton with a balsamic reduction as he brings the dutch oven to the sink to drain. He extracts the vacuum-sealed loin and slices the bag with a chef's knife, then sets it on his cutting board to rest.

From the pantry, he finds a jar of his favored French-imported dijon, and fresh Virginia parmesan from the fridge. He pats the loin dry with paper towel and is pleased to find it perfectly cooked. Sous vide is a reliable method of preparation, and simple to a fault. Difficult to get wrong when all he has to do is set it aside when he leaves for the day. It's not unlike a crock pot, but with none of the room for error, and that is immensely satisfying.

Hannibal spreads a thin layer of the dijon and a generous coating of the cheese over the outside, then sets a pan atop the burner, liberally coated with oil. He has only just turned the flame up and is on a mission to retrieve the slaw ingredients when he hears a sound and freezes.

Listens. Hears it again.

Someone is knocking at his front door.

Hannibal retreats to the cooktop. With a moment of consideration, he turns the flame off, movements stilted. Surely the FBI would not be so polite as to knock. Hannibal's neighbors know he maintains irregular hours, and are fairly self-reliant people anyway. Outside of an accident on the road drawing someone to his home in search of help, Hannibal can't imagine what someone would be visiting for so late.

Unless—

Hannibal strides to the door, listening with all his ability like he might hear and identify the heartbeat on the other side of the entryway. It turns out he needn't have bothered.

Will is gloriously livid, eyes wide and dark, and rudely pushes past Hannibal in the time it takes him to blink. Will does not look his usual self, rougher and boyish with his hair tied back at the nape of his neck, clad in unfitting clothing and work boots, wrapped and buttoned into Hannibal's wool coat that he wears like a monarch's robes. It suits him.

"You son of a bitch," Will says with a furious scowl, cocks his hip and sets his jaw, and yes, *there* he is, outfitted by the shadows in Hannibal's entryway, backlit by the glow from the kitchen. The cuts on his face have scabbed over, two red and rough patches across his cheekbone and along his jaw. His glasses sit atop one; Hannibal wonders if it hurts. Will probably doesn't care if it does.

Hannibal stares. Absorbs. He is not ashamed to admit that he is silent and admiring of Will's rage, and would gladly cultivate it to see this irate creature storm into his home on any given night. Perhaps he should cement Will's financial security more often.

Hannibal closes the front door and locks it. He expects Will is going to be here for a while. “No hello?”

“Don’t,”’ Will replies shortly. “You know what you did.”

“Shoes off.” Will blinks, temporarily off-kilter, and Hannibal presses his advantage. He walks away. “I’ll be in the kitchen if you’d like to continue your tirade.”

He hears Will scrambling to unlace his boots behind him; the muffled curse as a shoulder impacts the wall. Hannibal chuckles to himself as he crosses the kitchen threshold, then makes himself busy extracting two glasses and a bottle of chianti from the wine cooler. He no sooner has two measures poured than Will stalks into the kitchen, and his coat is gone. Instead, Hannibal takes in meshing tones of green and black plaid, and the ill-fitting shirt is familiar for the memory it holds—the night they met, Will just as sharp-tongued and combative now as he was then.

It calls for a countermeasure. Hannibal catches him off-guard when he hands Will the glass, traps him within the confines of civility. Will has a certain reverence for Hannibal’s belongings. He’ll be too careful being mindful of the glass’ fragility to slip into true anger.

Hannibal sips, and schools his features as he does. The flavor of the chianti bursts across his tongue like Sangiovese grapes between his teeth. Will’s expression is drawn and tight, a frustrated crinkle across his brow as he holds the glass in his splinted hand. Though he often finds the presence of mind to shed his manners in Hannibal’s presence, he was raised into them—Will spitefully and obligingly takes a small sip, his eyes on Hannibal all the while. He tracks Hannibal’s movements and stays very still; he is a lion on his first hunt, unsure but full of intent. But Hannibal is not prey, and does not feel the need to hide himself in that regard, not from Will.

He balances the carrots, radishes, and a head of red cabbage in the crook of his arm; teeters a fresh lemon atop them all, and sets them aside on a clear portion of the counter. With the ease and mastery of one comfortable in his domain, Hannibal extracts a handheld grater from the drawer and large cutting board from the cabinet below. He puts everything atop it, and reaches high to pull down a glass jar of poppy seeds. Will’s eyes weigh heavily on his back; Hannibal savors the sensation.

He takes another sip, and pulls a second knife from the butcher block. He turns, inclines his head, and holds it out handle-first to Will. “Would you like to sous chef?”

Will stares at the knife. His fingers tighten around the stem of the wine glass (but, Hannibal notices, he does hold it correctly). When his gaze lifts to Hannibal’s face, it seems to be with a slow and baffling sense of incredulity. “You’re offering me a weapon when I’m pissed at you?”

“You will either stab me or you won’t,” Hannibal replies. Amusement fizzes subtly inside his chest like champagne. He’d like to see Will try; absently wonders the depths to which he’d have to irritate Will to get him to truly consider it. With a frisson of pleasure and pride, he realizes Will wouldn’t have mentioned such a thing if he hadn’t already imagined it. “I’ll take my chances against your ire.”

Will takes another slow sip. The glass presses provocatively against the healing split in his lower lip as he considers the blade, considers Hannibal. His mouth is pleasantly red with the tint of the wine, a color that will become more bold and rich the more he drinks—if he does. Hannibal wonders if he might settle Will’s anger, temper his rage, convince him with soft words and soft touches to spend the night. Glut himself on Will’s scent, his weight, his warmth, taste the sweetness of his lips and the sting of his teeth. The two of them, evolving.

With a sigh, Will steps forward and reaches out. He takes the handle, and their hands touch; Hannibal holds the spine of the blade pinched between thumb and index finger. One wrong motion could cut him badly if Will so desired, but he holds steady. Holds Hannibal's eyes.

"It's good to see you, Will," Hannibal murmurs.

A soft, hesitant expression flickers across Will's face. His shoulders hunch under Hannibal's attention, defensive and unsure, and Will hides it behind the chunky frames of his glasses. It seems he has rebuilt his brittle outer shell in their time apart. Hannibal must once again coax him out and free, steep him in positive attention until he blooms.

It is a challenge, but not an unwelcome one. Having Will confident and wanting under his hands is too tempting a reward to pass up.

Will glances up over the rims of his glasses, through the curls of his bangs, and back down again to Hannibal's hand. He brushes their knuckles together, slow and deliberate, and in the same motion, deftly twists the knife away. He swivels around Hannibal with his head held high. "I'm still pissed at you." He stands at the counter and takes another sip of wine, turning the knife in his hand as he considers Hannibal's selected ingredients. "What am I making?"

The loin can wait a few minutes more. Hannibal insinuates himself at Will's side, just shy of hip-to-hip. "A winter slaw," Hannibal replies. "Dice the cabbage finely, then grate the carrots and radishes together." Hannibal extracts a stainless bowl from the cabinet above, as well as the glass bottle and pouring spout of oil. "And a lemon poppyseed vinaigrette. If you'd like to start with the vegetables, I'll toast the seeds."

Will nods and sets the wine glass aside. He doesn't hesitate with the blade, chopping deftly in firm, even strokes. He falls into the rhythmic motion of slicing, steel against the bamboo board in a familiar, comforting sound. Hannibal reflects briefly on the intimacy of having another person in his kitchen as he finds a small second skillet and toasts the poppyseeds over low heat. He heats the searing pan on another burner, and waits for the oil to grow hot enough to smoke.

The silence between them is tense, though Hannibal is unbothered by it. It's simply for want of hearing Will's voice when he asks, "Would you like to talk about it?"

Slice. "I can take care of myself," Will replies immediately, like the words were waiting, boiling beneath his skin. "Stepping in like that—first of all, is totally illegal, you don't have my permission, and I should probably turn you in for identity theft—but it's crossing boundaries, Hannibal." Will huffs, tosses an irritated glance back over his shoulder to where Hannibal stands attentively at the cooktop. The knife continues to move, growing quicker with the force of Will's agitation. "I know you probably did it from a place of caring, and I appreciate that, but, like…"

The blade lifts from the board, and Will gestures with it angrily. Hannibal blinks, watching with rapt attention as Will turns his attention back to the cabbage, and the lecture Will directs toward it. "It's over the top. You can't just *do* that. If you had concerns you should have talked to me about it, or, like," Will stutters, reorients himself, and turns bodily, expression twisting with distress, "for God's sake, you couldn't just, like, buy me a sandwich or something? Five *thousand* dollars. On top of the *ten* thousand you already spent on that fucking Gala ticket, I just—"

Hannibal huffs and steps forward, catches Will by the wrist with one hand and takes the knife from him with the other. Will snarls, but at least has the good sense to allow Hannibal to do it, rather than resist and run the risk of hurting them both. "I would have bought you lunch if you had come to see me." He sets the knife on the cutting board. There's quite enough cabbage already cut; he hands Will

the grater instead, and stands still while Will absorbs the change. “But I was trying to respect your request for space. I see that my actions may have been impulsive, but believe me that I would have done it whether or not you had been with me each day.”

Will’s chin tips up. His face is so close, and his lip curls in a subtle sneer. “Don’t bullshit me,” Will says softly, warningly. “I’m pissed because you violated my privacy. You weren’t respecting my request for space, you wanted my attention.”

Clever thing. Hannibal quirks a brow and backs away, returns to the cooktop and shuffles the toasting seeds. “So if I’d handed you a cheque and told you I wished to assist you in your struggles, you would have accepted it?”

No, Will would not have. They both know that perfectly well. Will scowls and sighs and turns around to grate the radishes. “No, because I’m not a *charity case,* Hannibal. I’m managing just fine.”

“Are you?” Hannibal asks. He sends Will a sidelong glance, and takes in the shape of his body beneath the baggy clothes. “You’ve lost weight.”

“I’m not starving, I’m *stressed,* ” Will snaps. He inhales slowly, exhales. He breathes again. Shoulders slump. He hangs his head.

Hannibal removes the seeds from the heat and sets them aside to cool. He approaches slowly, and leaves space between them; rests his hip against the counter, but lingers and arm’s length away. He regards Will with some measure of concern—the hollows under his eyes that he is trying to hide with his glasses, the slight tremble of his hands. He doesn’t look well. “I didn’t mean to cause you discomfort, Will,” Hannibal says. It’s not an apology; he has no intention of apologizing, and he isn’t sorry. “But I don’t regard you as a charity case. I wanted to help you.”

“I *know,”* Will replies with a distressed little moan. His hand clenches around the handle of the grater, knuckles bleached white. “But I’m an adult, Hannibal. You can’t just solve my problems. You *have* to let me manage them.”

Will’s dedication to his solitary existence would be an admirable thing if Hannibal were not trying so hard to break him of the habit. “No human being on this earth is every truly alone, Will. We are social creatures. Seeing distress in those we care for causes distress.” Hannibal reaches for him, rests his fingertips on the back of Will’s hand and feels him flinch. He *tsks* quietly, slides his palm over the backs of Will’s knuckles, the polyester splint, and tangles their fingers together. He waits until Will relaxes. It takes time and patience, but when he does, the satisfaction is immense. “I understand the need to feel secure. To provide for yourself, and to know that you *can* provide for yourself. I don’t doubt that of you. That’s not why I did it.”

Will tips toward him, but does not fully give in to the gravity between their bodies. He’s proud, determined, but starving for reassurance. Hannibal gives it in the form of his thumb traversing the sensitive vee of Will’s ulnar collateral ligament, the join between his fingers and the connective webbing of his palm.

Will wavers, but doesn't collapse. “How did you even get my bank information?”

Hannibal hums in quiet amusement. “I can’t tell you all my secrets. How will I pay your tuition?”

Will turns on a dime, eyes wide and accusing. His lips part in quiet alarm, disbelief, and he searches Hannibal’s face. “You didn’t,” he says, and lets out a far too relieved breath when the glint in Hannibal’s eyes gives away the joke. Will’s brows draw into a heavy frown, irritation making itself

known in the exposed points of his teeth, the shrinking of his pupils. “You better not, Hannibal, I *mean* it.”

Hannibal thinks it would be worth Will’s agitation, though he dares not say so. He smirks to himself and enjoys that it only seems to rile Will *more,* and brightens to a smile when Will’s eyes flicker toward the kitchen knife. “Have you reconsidered stabbing me?”

“Don’t *tempt* me,” Will warns. He huffs when Hannibal tugs on his hand, and obligingly goes where he is bid—but doesn’t turn into Hannibal’s embrace, and his shoulder bumps hard against Hannibal’s sternum. He noses roughly at Hannibal’s jaw, but when Hannibal’s lips brush Will’s temple, he turns his face away. “No,” Will says, though it sounds more pouty than angry. “No kiss. I’m still mad.”

Hannibal chuckles against his cheek. Stubborn, so stubborn. He knows very well that Will denying him is denying them both; he can easily see it in the way Will convulsively licks the trace of wine from his lips and leaves them slick and shiny. If Will hopes to hide the desire in his eyes behind his glasses, he is sorely out of luck. Hannibal winds his arm around Will’s waist—the benefit of Will’s ill-fitting clothes means his terrible jeans are slipping down, exposing the pale crest of his hip. Hannibal curls his fingers around the bone and feels Will shiver against his chest. That shiver turns to a full-body shudder when his mouth finds Will’s ear, when he nibbles at the soft scar tissue where the lobe is pierced through and murmurs, “My sincerest apologies, mylimasis. How should I make it up to you?”

Will’s mouth opens on a silent sound that never makes it out of his throat. He swallows it down and sets his jaw, presses his lips together. “Stop that,” he replies breathlessly.

So Hannibal stops. “If you’d like.” Hannibal has no desire to move away, but whether he truly meant it or not, Will has asked him to. He removes himself from Will’s warmth and returns to the kitchen island behind him. Each interaction with Will is a game of give and take, strategic push forward and retreat.

Now, he retreats. The oil on the stovetop is more than hot enough for Hannibal to begin searing the loin, and he’s reluctant to let it sit for much longer anyway. With a snap and sizzle, Hannibal places it into the pan. He can wait patiently until Will returns to him.

It takes less than a minute.

This time, it is Will who comes to Hannibal’s side. His wine glass is abandoned, half-full on the counter—his focus is solely on Hannibal as he cooks. Hannibal bites the inside of his cheek to resist a smug smile. “What’re you making?”

“Dijon and parmesan-crusted loin,” Hannibal replies. If asked, he is prepared to call it *pork*. Will doesn’t ask. “Cooked in the sous vide while I was on shift, finished on the rangetop.”

“Smells good,” Will says softly. His eyes slip from the pan, up Hannibal’s arm, and it lingers like a caress as his stare locks on Hannibal’s face. Hannibal does not react, but the warmth he feels is pleasant. No matter their subtle maneuvering of one another, Will’s regard is always welcome. Hannibal turns to look at him, meets Will’s gaze. He waits expectantly as the silence between them gains meaning, tension, words yet unspoken.

Will breaks their eye contact. His brow crinkles with frustration, but whatever it is he means to say, he does not seem to know how to say it.

Hannibal takes a step back, offers a small and merciful reprieve. “Here,” he says. “Step in.” Will does exactly that, and takes the grasp of the pan in his splinted hand. Hannibal watches for a moment over his shoulder, reads the silent intent when Will lifts his chin and deliberately relaxes one shoulder, offering the expanse of his neck and a place at his back for Hannibal to fill.

Will sighs when Hannibal’s chest meets his spine. Though their tension has a place and time, Hannibal enjoys this closeness. The indulgence of Will’s trust. He anticipates the day when Will stands with him like this knowing exactly what it is they’re making—dares to dream that day may eventually come, and Will’s acceptance with it. Perhaps, if he is fortunate; if he plays his cards right, and if Will’s supposed *obsession* with the Ripper as a killer can exist harmoniously with his regard for Hannibal as a man.

“It has to sear on each side,” Hannibal says. “Until it’s fragrant, and the parmesan crisps. Just a few minutes each turn. Not too long, since the meat is already cooked. It would be a different matter if we were finishing it in the oven, but here, we use the high heat to our advantage. There is a marriage of flavor in it being not quite charred, only nearly burned.”

Slowly, ever so slowly, Hannibal touches his lips to Will’s temple. He smooths them in a path over the hard ridges of Will’s scabs, jaw and cheek and back again, and feels the distance between those wounds spread when Will’s mouth opens on a gentle exhale.

“I feel burned,” Will whispers, and his voice is nearly lost over the sound of human flesh sizzling on the stove. “I didn’t actually want you to stop.”

“Nor did I want to,” Hannibal replies. Will’s fingers clench around the handle of the skillet. “But you asked me to. And I will always stop, unless you ask me *not* to.”

Will licks his lips. The sound of them parting is not unlike a kiss. Hannibal exhales smoothly and touches Will’s side, drags his knuckles down slight inward curve of Will’s waist to feel him shiver and squirm. What he gets in response is even better.

“I missed you.” Will moans it like the words have been ripped out of him. “God, I did. I shouldn’t.”

And just like that, Hannibal is vastly, fiercely interested. Invested, as he always is where Will is concerned. His mouth slips downward. His tongue brushes under the curve of Will’s jawbone, tasting skin, tasting the pounding of Will’s pulse. “No? Why shouldn’t you?”

“It’s too much. Too fast. I—” Will laughs, a broken little sound, that starts and ends with him whispering, “Hannibal.”

Hannibal’s arm slips around him, fingers spreading wide and warm and possessive across Will’s belly. He presses an open-mouthed kiss to Will’s pulse, feels Will’s answering moan shaking against his lungs. Hannibal rubs his mouth against the slick patch of Will’s skin, wets his lips with it, feels each breathless, aborted gasp like a punch to the gut. “Whatever you feel,” Hannibal says, “You are not alone. I’m right beside you.” His hand clenches in the front of Will’s shirt, gently pulls him back until their bodies are fully flush. “The human experience is made to burn bright and fast. Whatever we feel, we are made to feel it with our whole selves, like what you feel for me, and I for you. Don’t be afraid of it, Will.”

Will laughs again. It is wounded. Needing. Punctuated with a gasp. “I’m not afraid of you.”

Will reaches forward and turns the burner off, then pushes the pan across the cooktop, off the direct heat. Hannibal barely has time to absorb the sound of steel against the iron grates before Will has

turned and shoved him backward, until his back meets the opposite counter and Will fills the space at his front. Mouth demanding, body insistent, Will drags him down into a kiss that tastes like wine, and bites at his lower lip with small, sharp teeth. The sting of it is exquisite, the edge of pain accentuating desire.

Hannibal has always been a slave to his sensory needs. Will has always managed to fill all of them.

Hannibal snarls at the drag of Will's blunt fingernails against his scalp, the tug as Will angles his head so their teeth don't knock in the process of their kissing. Will's tongue is swift, clever, insistent—Hannibal finds it with his own, coaxes Will into exploration. He wants, yes, and he wants so very much. He wants Will to be his, to never stray, never leave. To spend his hours here in the halls of Hannibal's home, for them to push each other to greater heights and greater passions. New beginnings.

Hannibal knots his hands in Will's oversized shirt, drags him closer, to stand between his legs. The weight of Will's body is somehow more slight than it had been even a few days ago, and Hannibal is determined to see him sated in any way be can manage. Touched, kissed, held, cherished, anything and everything. One palm slips under Will's knee and draws it up, parts Will's thighs with hardly a thought and hooks Will's leg around his hip. Arousal is a given, a constant, and the friction of Will's other thigh against the hot swell of his cock is indescribable; Hannibal's breathing stutters as Will's nails trail down the back of his neck, across the blades of his shoulders, and down, down, raising gooseflesh over each vertebrae of his spine until they flatten on the countertop behind him.

Will breaks away from Hannibal's mouth, lips red, eyes dark and terribly wild. He tucks his face against Hannibal's shoulder as they grind. Moans. Whines. Gasps, "Oh fuck, *fuck.*"

Hannibal presses his face into Will's hair. Inhales the scent of drug-store strawberry shampoo, of skin, of Will, of *his.* The monster inside him unsheathes its claws and longs to lay claim, and it is with that in mind that Hannibal tucks his chin over Will's shoulder, wraps his arms around Will's waist and holds him so close that it nearly hurts. Feels the roll of Will's hips against his in tight, harsh drags, the abrasive sensation of cloth against skin in the absence of sweat and slickness.

He cups the curve of Will's ass through his baggy jeans. Hannibal holds, guides his movements into something more controlled, and Will slows—a curious swivel of hips, a shuddering curse snapped against Hannibal's neck at they rut together. He savors the sensation of Will's mouth at the base of his neck, sucking until it aches. Hannibal's gut clenches at the knowledge others will see this mark and know their debauchery. This private moment in Hannibal's kitchen will follow him into work, into hospital halls and operating rooms. The brand laid upon him by Will Graham, his attention and adoration, is one that will last beyond dripping sweat and pounding hearts.

Hannibal wants him. He wants Will stripped to skin and bone, his to devour and consume. He wants to cut Will out of his terrible clothes with the chef's knife on the counter. He wants to carry Will upstairs and fuck him in silk sheets, wrench gasps and sobs and screams from his lungs. He wants Will's back bowed in ecstasy, furrows torn into bedclothes and sensitive skin. He wants slickness and heat and Will's body clutching around him. He wants to feel Will's heartbeat from inside. He wants—

Will's teeth pierce his shoulder, and for one beautiful, terrible moment, those thoughts are gone, and only the monster remains. Hannibal's mind, his desire, every sense and sensibility goes blank.

He bleeds. Hannibal knows he is bleeding. In the split-second instinct he has to snap Will's neck, he forces his hands to clench on Will's hips instead. Hannibal stands still and the world rushes on around him. His ears ring; all sound fades. His mind is at war with itself. One half screams *kill him.* The other half whispers *keep him*.

And then Will freezes. When his jaws unlock, Hannibal feels the distinct sensation of teeth leaving his skin, and the barricade of punctured fabric dislodging from his flesh thread by thread. Will bit him through his shirt. Oh, the bite won't be deep, and it may not even scar, but the fact remains that Will has set his teeth to Hannibal's skin and tasted his fill of blood, and no one else has ever done that. Hannibal has never been bitten before, *truly* bitten. Not by a lover, or prey, or anyone.

Like in all things, Will is the first.

Will throws himself back with a gasp and wide, wild eyes. His back meets the opposite counter. His eyes lock on the wet patch on Hannibal's shoulder, damp with saliva and pinpricks of blood that have soaked through, and Will shakes like a spring fawn. He looks ravenous, and equally frightened by that. Ashamed, as he presses the heel of his hand to his cock and muffles a whimper behind closed lips. Will's shoulders hunch. His pupils are blown and nearly eclipse his irises, and Hannibal has never seen someone look so simultaneously aroused and terrified.

The more silent seconds that pass, the more the realization sinks in that Will has bitten him. *Marked* him. That doing so was his primary instinct. That he hasn't thought or planned, but simply felt and responded. Animal instinct, and Will's is rooted in teeth. The predator Hannibal had seen in him is closer to the surface than previously believed. It is present and awake, and it *wants* as badly as he does, howling for a mate.

Will's eyes are rapt on Hannibal's shoulder—it burns, but the wound is superficial. Now that the shock of it has passed, he knows physically, it is little more than a scrape. But the truth of it remains: whether he meant to or not, whether he knows it or not, Will has claimed him, Ripper and Hannibal both.

Will looks up. Their eyes lock. In them, Hannibal sees the creature he's been courting, and here they stand, surrounded by their own territory and no interruptions. Mouth red. Eyes black, with only the barest slivers of blue remaining. Pink cheeks. White teeth. Lit by golden glow and creeping shadow, all rich colors and cheap texture, Will is the most confounding piece of art he has ever seen, and Hannibal wants him enough to kill for it.

"Do you want me to stop?" Hannibal asks, because he must. Whatever Will wants. *Whatever* he wants, Hannibal will respect it. Hannibal will not force him and would never. Will's trust is too precious to fracture with something so fickle as unfulfilled physical desire. This is just one moment out of a million.

Will's mouth opens. His tongue touches his teeth, and his chest heaves with the force of his breath. "I want…" Will's gaze flickers to the bite and back. He blinks slowly, almost dazed, but his eyes are sharp as blades. "I want, um." He swallows. Lashes flutter, like he is trying so desperately to get himself to focus. In truth, Hannibal is having difficulty with it himself, but he is locked on Will's every word. He simply needs an answer, yes or no.

Will takes a step forward on shaking legs. In the back of his mind, Hannibal knows he should be concerned with how they're healing, but he can't summon the presence of mind to care. He is waiting on Will, his actions, his decision. His consent is the only tether holding Hannibal to humanity; a thin golden chain that loosens with every step Will takes toward him.

There is a glint in Will's eyes that is bright like fire, burning, locked on the imprint of his teeth as he draws near. The monster inside Hannibal sees it, recognizes it. It's the same impulse that drove Will to bite him in the first place. It grows more intense the closer Will gets, until he can slip between the very space he vacated between Hannibal's legs, until his eyes are rapt upon that place, and Hannibal's hands are clenched so tightly on the countertop that he feels he could fracture the granite.

When Will leans forward, so very slowly, Hannibal holds still.

Will presses his mouth there, a chaste kiss that morphs into warm breath as his lips part. Ever so gently, Will sets his teeth in the imprints, but does not bite. The hard points of his canines are tangible through linen and silk, pressed against the crest of Hannibal's shoulder, just shy of his neck, bracketing the tendon. Will could do a great deal of damage if he wanted to. Impact the mobility of his shoulder, surely.

Hannibal reaches up with one hand, fingers aching with the release of tension, and the broad span of his palm spreads around the nape of Will's neck. He is not entirely certain whether he is holding Will closer or preparing to wrench him away. The ridges of his nails press into Will's tender skin. There is something about the threat of danger that is unspeakably primal, the uncertainty of whether Will means to hurt or hold, fight or fuck.

Hannibal has never denied his animal side. His instincts are a gift from the ancestors of humanity. What must it be like for Will to cling to the outlines of civility? And what will it take for Hannibal to set him loose into savagery?

Will leans into him and Hannibal's gut clenches. He bares his teeth, though Will can't see it. Will is warm, heavy against his straining cock, and Hannibal can scent the beginnings of Will's sweat, the rich undertones of sex, but none of that is the word *yes.*

Hands knot in Hannibal's shirt at his waist and he bites back a growl. His mouth drops open as Will drags them upward, and his lips and teeth follow, a slow, sensual drag to the column of Hannibal's neck. They linger on his throat. The hot, wet flat of Will's tongue against his pulse. Palms pushing up and over his pectorals, his shoulders—

Will's fingers slip into his hair, curled behind his ears, and the pads of his thumbs smooth over Hannibal's cheeks. It's assertive. Presumptuous. Affectionate. If anyone has ever dared to touch him like this before Will, Hannibal certainly can't remember it. Will stares at him, and Hannibal sees himself reflected back in the infinite darkness and danger of Will's eyes.

"I'm still so fucking mad at you," Will murmurs, and drags Hannibal down for a bruising kiss.

It is all the permission he needs.

With all the strength he's managed over the years of moving bodies, moving Will is infinitely more pleasurable. Hannibal slides his hands beneath Will's thighs and *lifts,* hauls him up and growls his victory as Will scrambles to lock his legs around his hips. The weight of him drags Will down against his cock. Hannibal exhales hard as Will squirms, moans, clutches at his shoulders and digs his fingers into the bite he left behind, parts his jaws for Hannibal to fuck his tongue inside and *take.*

Hannibal cracks his eyes open to navigate and sees the hellion staring back at him. He'll later determine it was the distraction of Will sucking on his tongue that only allowed them to get as far as pinning Will against the fridge, but that's a worry for another time. Will gasps as his back meets unforgiving stainless steel, cold against the nape of his neck where Hannibal's fingernails had left indentations of his desire. It doesn't matter to either of them—the friction is incredible, and Will grips the handle for leverage in his broken hand, and the slow, fevered grind of their bodies needs no location other than with one another.

"Oh," Will moans, and his voice breaks, drops his head back against the metal door with a hollow *thud*. "Oh god, oh *fuck.*"

Filthy mouth. Hannibal should have figured. There's such terrible delight in pulling him apart, tearing him from the clothes of his social graces. Will's whining exposes the expanse of his throat to Hannibal's teeth, and, well, turnabout is fair play. He is as gentle with his teeth as he can manage when Will keeps swiveling his hips, keeps one hand knotted in Hannibal's hair. The frames of his glasses slip down the bridge of his nose when Will drops his head forward; they slip off and clatter somewhere behind Hannibal on the floor. Maybe they're broken, maybe not.

Hannibal readjusts his grip and gets more fabric in his hands than he does of Will—his jeans are slipping down, slipping off, trapped somewhere around his thighs. Will curses as the excess gets in their way, interrupts the perfect slot and slide of their hips. Will claws at Hannibal's shoulder, his neck, trails of tension and fire as Will rakes his nails over the fabric. "Off," he pants. "Off, now."

It takes a truly surprising amount of manual dexterity to remove Will's pants without putting him down, but as Will pulls his leg back and out of the oversized denim, it does open Hannibal's eyes to the possibility of Will's flexibility. With one leg free, it's a simple matter to secure it around his waist, anchor Will's back against the fridge, and peel him out of his jeans. His thighs tremble under Hannibal's touch, fever-hot, shaved smooth. Will's body is a complex system of sensory marvels, tailor-made for Hannibal's desires.

Beneath denim is lace, swollen and stretched by Will's erection. Hannibal mouths at his neck, glances down between their bodies. The contrast of pale skin and dark fabric is striking; short, dark pubic curls and the pink undertones of Will's blood peering through. Somewhere in distant corners of Hannibal's mind, he remembers that he had meant to make dinner. It seems so far away now, so insignificant. Hannibal lifts his head, meets Will's longing eyes, his permissive nod. Slowly, so slowly, Hannibal lifts his chin and angles his head, slides his tongue over Will's healing lower lip, and sucks the taste of sweet chianti from his mouth, inhales in the space between their lips and lets the scent of this moment pool on his soft palate.

Hannibal ghosts his fingers across Will's shaft, from the crux of his hips and up toward his belly; traces the ridge of Will's cockhead with the pad of his thumb and gathers the wetness on his skin. Their eyes lock, and Will lets out a wounded little sound when Hannibal slips his thumb into his own mouth to taste. Salt and musk burst over his tongue, robust and human. Though the taste might be improved by a well-rounded diet, the natural flavor of Will's precome is far from unpleasant. Hannibal leans forward, traps Will between his body and metal and teases his mouth open with his tongue, thrusts forward against the softness of Will's ass over and over, revels in Will's broken moan as Hannibal traces his teeth.

Will lets go of the fridge and brings the splint to his teeth—there is the ripping sound of velcro as Will pries it open, throws it off to land somewhere on the kitchen floor. The doctor in Hannibal should protest. The monster is thrilled. Free and unbound at last, Will clutches at his neck, his hair. Will strokes Hannibal's cheek with shaking fingers, the bridge of his nose, the cartilage of his ear; gently scritches at the start of Hannibal's stubble, rubs his fingertips against it. Hannibal pulls back just enough to breathe, to blink slowly and meet Will's eyes, and Will clenches his hand in Hannibal's gaping collar, partially-undone by their roving hands.

"Please," Will whispers. His voice shakes. When Hannibal leans forward to touch his mouth to Will's throat, his pulse thunders in hot syncopation under his lips. "Hannibal, touch me, please."

Hannibal rumbles a sound of amusement and acquiescence, chuckles at how the tables have turned on this situation. "Am I not?" he asks. But he won't deny Will. Pleasure is the goal of this encounter, and Will's enjoyment is paramount.

Will weakly slaps at his shoulder with an open palm, scolding and wanting. “You know what I mean, asshole.”

A moment of pause. Yes, he does, but the details are foggy. For a moment, Hannibal’s hands gentle, the slow roll of their bodies stills. Will whines in protest, but falls silent when Hannibal leans forward. Presses their chests together, and rests his cheek against Will’s. For a suspended section of time, there is only the warmth they share. Frantic energy paused, but not stopped, as Will wraps his arms around Hannibal’s neck. Kisses him. Holds him close in a lover’s embrace. Arousal simmers beneath his skin, but so too does affection.

Hannibal noses at Will’s cheekbone. “How far do you want this to go?”

Will blinks slowly. The desperate tension around his eyes goes soft, open, almost innocent. Wondrous. Bitten-red lips, flushed cheeks. Pity the goddess that should look upon Will now. He is beautiful to rival Aphrodite. “I, um.” Will swallows, and Hannibal feels the flutter of his throat like a butterfly’s wings—fragile, breakable as this new stage of their becoming emerges from its cocoon. “I just want you,” Will says softly. “This. Us. We’ll have time for the rest—I hope we will.”

Hannibal holds Will just a little bit tighter, a little more insistently at the suggestion that they’ll be separated. The idea is abhorrent. Unacceptable. And not the first time Will has made the allusion to a limited run of them together. What monsters occupy Will’s mind, Hannibal wonders? Is it solely the Ripper? Or are there others? If there are, Hannibal intends to hunt them down and eat them. “As much time as you desire, Will, I promise.” He rubs at Will’s hip, a soothing motion, tracing the architecture of Will’s pelvic crest with his thumb. “I want you to be comfortable.”

Will’s lips pull at a smile, though there’s a flash of pain in the depths of his eyes that Hannibal senses isn’t physical, but he laughs against Hannibal’s temple. “I’m as comfortable as I can be dry-humping against a fridge that costs more than my car. Oh, god, *ohh—”*

Hannibal mouths at Will’s neck as he slips his hand beneath the waistband of Will’s panties, lace scratching at the backs of his knuckles, the soft, slick heat of Will’s dripping cock cradled in his fingers. “Mouthy thing,” Hannibal growls against his throat. He nips at the tender flesh of Will’s neck, leaves pale pink imprints that are sure to fade before morning. Tightens his fist, slips his hand up Will’s shaft, adjusts when Will wriggles restlessly in his search for pleasure.

“*Han*nibal,” Will whines, and the sound is impossibly sweet. Hannibal wets his lips, twists his wrist, and Will’s breathy gasp is more intoxicating than the finest Bordeaux. Though he’s content to pleasure Will like this, to rut and grind and fuck against him in an impulsive frenzy, he does so look forward to taking his time. Making Will fall apart under his hands, his mouth. Being able to return the favor of sinking his teeth into Will’s neck, sinking into Will’s body, and feeling Will unleash that feral impulse in earnest.

For now, though, this enjoyment is—

Hannibal’s breath leaves him in a huff as Will reaches between them to shove his hand beneath Hannibal’s lounge pants and boxer-briefs. His hips stutter as Will’s knuckles brush his cock, push lower to gently knead his sac, trail his fingers through the thatch of pubic hair that nests around his erection. Will’s palm is soft, but his fingers are slightly callused; the contrast is new, alien and unfamiliar, but it’s—

Hannibal grits his teeth as Will circles his fingers around the head of his cock, at the quiet, breathless laugh Will murmurs at his ear. “All’s fair,” Will says, and grinds down against him, rhythmically

clenches his fingers in a slow, sensual pull that would make a lesser man's knees give out. "Just don't drop me, hmm?"

Hannibal pins him to the fridge with the weight of his torso and thighs, brackets Will in so securely that if he falls, Hannibal is surely going down with him. "Menace," Hannibal breathes in near-silent wonder.

"It's not that deep. I just know what I like," Will mutters and laughs and *moans* when Hannibal takes his advice and turns his technique right around on him. Will shivers and it shakes them both, arches and finds himself unable to move. His pupils fatten, and Hannibal files that away in his mind palace for later, pushed under the rug of this room he's creating from the memory of wine and the scent of artificial strawberry and sex and *Will.*

The rock and push of their bodies together is hypnotic; in a strange part of Hannibal's mind, he is transported to an alternate version of the night they met, time and disorder folding them together this way weeks before it's actually happened. Will had been so lovely then, and lovelier now. Hannibal wonders if Will even truly realizes that, in this state, he is entirely raw—no makeup, no defenses. Only himself, entirely Hannibal's.

Hannibal would not change a day of their time together. Were he to go back, he would doom every soul to death on the Beltway all over again.

Will whines, and there is a split-second where Hannibal fears he has said it aloud. But no—Hannibal's hand speeds, the filthy sound of Will's own slick around his flesh, the ridges and veins of his pretty cut cock slipping against the lines of Hannibal's palm. Life line, love line, heartline from Will to him and back again. Hannibal rubs against the slit where wetness beads, and lower, at the seam of glans and frenulum. It pulls a punched-out sound from Will's lungs, a twitch of his hips, quivering in his bones. Hannibal touches his lips to Will's pulse and feels it vibrate against his tongue.

Will clutches him close, digs his nails into the nape of Hannibal's neck. He ducks his head and pants against Hannibal's shoulder, working his free hand beneath the collar of Hannibal's stained and sweaty button-down and shoving it out of the way. Will seals his mouth around the bite mark in earnest and *sucks.* When he keens, it feeds directly into Hannibal's bones. Will's hips stutter. Twist. Arch like he's trying to get away, and Hannibal tightens his grip around each upward stroke, treasures the bitten-off whine that breaks into gasping pants. Will nuzzles frantically against Hannibal's shoulder with plaintive, pleading whines, huffs frantically for breath—

His hand stalls on Hannibal's cock, but fortunately the slack softness of his fingers is adequate to rut against. He fucks across the slippery ridges of the inside of Will's knuckles, the wrinkles of his cupped palm, the soft and supple meat of his thumb. In return, he holds—provides a tight, slick channel between his fingers for Will to cry out and thrust into, to howl his need to ceramic tile and granite counters and Hannibal's starving sensibilities. Will rides the heel of his hand, whines and whimpers as his legs tighten around Hannibal to the point of pain. Will constricts, holds, tosses his head back against the fridge with such force that Hannibal worries idly about concussion. He comes in helpless little jerks of his hips that jostle him against Hannibal's throbbing erection. He bites. Hannibal feels the imprint of his teeth like a brand, pulsing in time as light builds behind his eyes and tension in every filament of muscle and he, too, spills between them. His lounge pants will be ruined. Hannibal can not possibly find it within himself to care.

He locks his knees, leans into Will, holds them both up with the combined weight of their bodies. They breathe together. Wait out the trembles and shaky knees, and Will murmurs a moan when Hannibal laps the salt from his neck. Will nurses at the pinpricks of blood on his shoulder, rubs his lips and cheeks and forehead against cooling skin anywhere he can reach. His nails touch Hannibal's

scalp, the crown of his head, trail downward and start over again. It is with a strange sensation in his chest that Hannibal realizes Will is *petting* him, his hands roving in small, soft motions, never entirely still.

Touch-starved, Hannibal's mind whispers. Will is utterly alone in the world but for him. Reliant on the stability and comfort he brings. It would be such terrible vindication for the time he's spent earning Will's trust if not for the fact that Hannibal enjoys it just as much, and that makes it a liability. Makes it dangerous. And still, Hannibal is determined to keep him.

In time, the shaking stops but shivers start. Sweat coats their skin and does as it is meant to, cooling them to post-exertion temperatures. No amount of primal lick-and-kiss grooming will substitute their shared need for a shower. But that doesn't stop Will as he lifts his head, blindly searches for Hannibal's mouth until their lips meet in the middle. The kiss is soft, sucking, slow, and ends in the slackening of Will's jaw until their tongues simply touch. Taste.

Hannibal could sustain his need for sensory enrichment solely from Will's body for a very, very long time.

And then Will pulls back. In the bare millimeters between their lips, he murmurs, "Did I ruin dinner?"

Hannibal is stunned. Stricken. He starts to laugh. What else can he do? "No, mylimasis," he replies. "I think it's salvageable."

Will smiles. Nuzzles, but doesn't reply.

Hannibal does. "Stay," he says. "Tonight, with me. It's far too late for you to drive home."

Stubbornness lights Will's eyes, but melts away just as quickly. It is a slave to the joys and whims of Will's body, and right now, Will is sated. So too must be his headstrong streak. "Okay," Will whispers. Smiles wider. Looks so young, so lovely.

And still, Hannibal must tempt fate. He always does. "Are you still angry with me?"

Will cozies up against Hannibal's chest, and with a tremulous, contented sigh, closes his eyes. "Ask me again tomorrow."

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter Notes

Hi all! Sorry for the late chapter. Lots going on this week and next, lots of deadlines to crunch for, lots of live music going on here rn that's occupying my time! Hopefully things will stay manageable, but in the meantime, here we are!

I want to also thank you all for the incredible response this fic is getting? Like, seriously, I don't know where everyone came from, but this fic all of a sudden has started getting oodles of hits per chapter and lots of lovely, amazing comments and you guys just??? Inspire me so much??? Get me to push through my late nights so I have something for you to enjoy?? Seriously, I appreciate it so much. I couldn't do this without the love and support you offer, and your interest in this story is so humbling. I hope I can provide an exciting journey that keeps you guessing and lots of feels along the way. <3

Also, we're up over 100k! Holy fuck! Not sure when that happened! Remember when i thought this was gonna be a ficlet series?? ~~lol FUCK~~ Don't worry we still have a long way to go. I have Plans™.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If one were to ask Will what his plan was upon storming over to Hannibal's house in the middle of the night, he might've said he didn't have one. Class was the same frustrating drone it always was, Will had irritably typed up a stormy piece on the oversaturation of media leading to public indifference or conditional outrage, Miriam had promised to call him once she could get details on the Ripper files, and yet *another* fruitless meeting with his other source had worn Will down into exhaustion. In truth, he was itching for a fight and not much else.

But this, Will thinks as he tucks his head beneath Hannibal's chin, *this is much better.*

Morning light and soft sheets, a warm and heavy body at his side. Will never knew he could want something like this. Being solitary always seemed so much safer. But now he is here and it feels so easy to allow himself to want and be wanted, his hair in long loose curls across the pillow, fuzzy from sleep, Hannibal's arm tucked over his bare waist, around his back, radiant with heat. Will's legs, freshly bandaged, tangle with Hannibal's. And when they sleep beside one another, his nightmares somehow seem to subside.

It's a peace he can't accept at home, alone in the dark with only Winston for company. He lies awake each night and wonders if it will be the night the Ripper finally comes to him, flays him open with careful hands and deliberate cuts, and makes art of his blood and bones. Elevates the sum of Will's lonely backwater existence with an understanding only an artist can provide, and makes Will a monument to all that he's seen. All that he's written, laid out for others to understand what the Ripper understands. The Ripper makes masterpieces. Will only interprets them.

Will's first regret is that he won't live to see what's made of him. That is, after all, the entire point. Perhaps it'll be enough to speak to the Ripper in his last moments. To see through his eyes, if he lets Will do so. Will's second regret is that, when the time comes, is that he will never again have what he has right now: Hannibal, here. Hannibal, his.

But inside this room, the Ripper ceases to exist. It's a safety and serenity that only Hannibal's presence can give him. Will glances up and takes in the diffused sunlight on Hannibal's face, his tousled bangs, the ink-dark spread of his closed lashes and relaxed, angular features, and knows.

He can't bear to say it, but he knows.

Don't be afraid of it, Will.

But he is. He *is* afraid, and also at peace. His life will fade into a bittersweet memory, but Will knows Hannibal will remember him. As for the Ripper—

—the Ripper will consume him, and carry part of Will with him forever.

He can't walk away. There's no sense in it. What would his life be if he turned tail and ran, turned himself in as the mind behind *Analysis* , was put in protective custody and never saw Hannibal again? No school, no little house in Wolf Trap, no Chesapeake Ripper. Death has been the axis of Will's stability since he was young. Live and thrive, breed and die. The life cycle of fish, of insects, the decomposition of dead things. It was only once he moved here that he realized how beautiful death could be. To see the sum of a life in a display of flesh and old blood.

Walk away? After all of it? What would be the point of that? All Will can do is accept. Walk *into* the open and waiting arms of the man Hannibal calls *his killer*, and hope, at least, it doesn't hurt too much. Hope the the Ripper will be merciful; that Will's interpretations haven't caused undue offense, and that when the Ripper takes him apart to see how he works, it won't be with malice, but rather rapt interest. Will hopes he has earned that much.

It's the best death Will can imagine, if he must imagine one at all.

For whatever time he has, though, Will likes to imagine he might spend it like this. Warm, comfortable, tucked under Hannibal's arm and listening to the sound of his sleep-shallow breaths. Will doesn't dare move—Hannibal's a light sleeper, and even just being awake in his presence is sure to rouse him eventually. But watching him rest, the play of light over his features, the picture he makes while tangled in deep blue sheets, is a rare opportunity to see him unguarded. A privilege. He knows it the same way he knows that precious few people have ever seen what Will sees right now.

It's humbling. Endearing. Enchanting. In its own way, soothing.

Will wishes he could trace Hannibal's features with his fingertip without waking him, but he knows such a thing is an impossibility. Instead, he lets his eyes close, lets himself fall into a drifting doze, wades into a roiling sea of dreams.

Will lies on the shore near the riverbend behind his home. The trees provide shade; the sun paints swaths of gold across the grass. Like a Renaissance painting, he wears only a sheet of blue silk wrapped around him as a robe, feet bare, hair unbound. He waits.

A figure rises from the current in the shape of a man, his silhouette a shadow that consumes all light. A void. Nothing can exist where he stands. His presence is absolute, eclipses all life around him. He carries himself with the poise and purpose of a god as he steps onto the bank, wearing a diadem of antlers upon his head. He is the divine spirit of animals, king of all manner of predators and beasts. Ruler of all, subject to none.

He walks to Will without hesitation, without pause, knowing exactly what he seeks. When he looks down and their eyes meet, his regard is attentive. Unwavering.

He holds out his hand. A heart rests in his palm. Will knows intrinsically that it is meant to be a gift. He doesn't ask who it came from—he only knows that it's for him. Will smiles as his monster places it in his grasp, as one claw trails tenderly across his pink and glowing cheek, over his parted lips, and down his throat.

It is a gift that Will accepts gladly. He bites. The flesh is hot in his mouth, nearly burning; blood bursts across his tongue, cloying and metallic. When his teeth sink into flesh, red overflows. It drips over his mouth, his chin, streams downward until it is a waterfall that pours over Will's chest—

—his empty chest. Hollow and aching, pulsing and sore.

And still, Will chews and swallows.

When he looks up, the Ripper's smile is full of fangs, tender and cruel. He rests his broad, burning palm on the crown of Will's head.

"Do not forget who you belong to," he whispers. *"You have only ever been, and will always be mine."*

Antlers rip from Will's skull, and he howls.

Will has been quiet this morning.

He is no less open to affection—he smiles when their fingers brush as Hannibal hands him a cup of coffee, and leans into the absent (testing) touches Hannibal offers as he finishes making breakfast. Hannibal might think it was a side effect of an emotionally charged evening and subsequent good night's rest, but there is something wistful in the way Will looks at him. There is something deeper happening that Will has not yet made him privy to.

To say that Hannibal is both curious and impatient to resolve Will's hesitation would be an understatement.

He ponders on how best to broach the subject as he whisks béchamel and hollandaise both on the rangetop, admiring the slender lines of Will's back beneath his borrowed button-down. The sleeves are slightly too large, rolled up around his forearms as he cuts thick slices of brioche; his jeans slouch down around his narrow hips, exposing the waistband of his lace panties, which they'd put in the wash the night before.

(Hannibal's lounge pants were fortunately not as much of a loss as he feared.)

Will's hair is held up in a spider clip, disheveled and truly attractive. Curls slip loose and his bangs are soft wisps across his angled face, eyes half-lidded with the remnants of sleep. Hip cocked against the countertop, deftly handling a knife without hesitation or concern, Hannibal pauses to absorb this moment. Commit it to his mind.

Will glances over and catches him looking. His cheeks flush sweetly pink, and he averts his eyes. "I'm not going to cut myself. You can stop worrying."

"I hadn't even considered it," Hannibal replies. He tilts his head to the side in silent surveyance; Will's shoulders tense. He doesn't deal well with being the center of attention, even in privacy. Does he deflect because he fears criticism, Hannibal wonders? Or perhaps even praise makes him uncomfortable? "I was simply admiring you, mylimasis."

Will's face burns red. He sets down the knife and rubs the back of his neck, shoots Hannibal a surreptitious glance like he is searching for truthfulness—blushes further when he realizes Hannibal is still looking. Stricken. Surprised. Pleased. Hannibal reads the flashes of emotion as they cross Will's face, lovely and underappreciated thing that he is. It seems a terrible shame to let him remain unaware.

"It's not only your mind I find attractive, Will, surely you must know that."

Will stares studiously down at the bread. His teeth sink into his lower lip, roll it delicately, careful of the still-healing split. His exhale shudders slightly as he picks up the slices and brings them over, sets them on the work station beside the cooktop. His eyes flicker upward, uncertain—as Hannibal tilts his body toward Will. His attention is demanded by the sauce, and it's a delicate process that he won't allow himself to ruin, but he gives as much of himself to Will in this moment as he is able. Will understands; he is not demanding, but simply turns his attention to Hannibal's hands as he works. Leans against the counter, but now only an arm's length away, and Hannibal has rarely been so distracted while cooking before.

"I know," Will murmurs, and the fringe of his lashes brushes his heated cheeks. "I knew when we met. Still surprises me sometimes, though."

"Why?" Hannibal asks, curious. "You're careful about your appearance. You have very fine bone structure, classic features. Objectively, Will, whether you present as masculine or feminine, your aesthetic wants for nothing." Will makes a sound that is painfully embarrassed, though similarly pleased. He seems conflicted by Hannibal's compliments—though, in Hannibal's eyes, they are more akin to sensible observations. Will is a beautiful specimen of humanity, young and fit and in his prime. They are well-suited to each other, in any imaginable sense.

Hannibal whisks the white sauce together until the roux is blended with the cream, then reaches for the nutmeg and grates some in. Another whisk until the sauce is fragrant, and he slides it across the cooktop. Turns his attention to the hollandaise until it is smooth, blends it with lemon and sea salt, and sets it off the heat.

He turns to Will. His arms are wrapped around himself, shoulders pitched and head ducked with embarrassed uncertainty, and Hannibal reels him in. Pulls Will into his arms, ducks to kiss his cheek, and is pleased at the contented sound he receives in return. Will's skin is warm against his lips, nearly burning, and he smells like Hannibal. His clothes, his home. His. And the things that are his should always be well-cared for, Will first and foremost among them. "Where is this doubt coming from?"

"There's no doubt," Will replies softly. Lifts his head and Hannibal obliges him with a kiss, tastes coffee on Will's mouth. When Will pulls away it's with reluctance but purpose, and goes to reclaim

his coffee cup from the other counter. “I know who I am,” Will adds. “I know objectively when I look good. I know you want me. I don’t doubt any of that. This is just…” Will sighs and picks up the cup, soft-eyed and radiating that sense of distant longing like he didn’t create this space between them himself. He takes a sip. Looks at Hannibal, and his lips lift in a strange little smile. “More than I thought I’d ever get to have.”

Hannibal considers him then. Ponders that statement as he spreads butter over the slices of bread and sets them on the grill pan to toast. “A person who cares about you and makes you breakfast?”

Will hides another smile behind the lip of the cup. “Would it be bad to say yes?”

“It would be sad, I think, but not uncommon to doubt one might ever leave a solitary existence.” Will steps out of reach as Hannibal goes to the fridge to collect the dijon mustard, gruyere, provolone, and fontina. He balances them atop the carton of farm-fresh eggs, and a package of butcher’s paper that contains homemade prosciutto made from the hygienist's well-muscled leg. It’s cured fabulously, if Hannibal does say so himself. He closes the fridge with his shoulder, and catches the sidelong, lingering look Will gives it before his eyes turn back to Hannibal. “I had wondered about the same thing myself.”

Something complicated passes Will’s face—a flash of pain and sudden sadness that Hannibal can’t immediately qualify. He slows as he returns to the rangetop and considers it. What it might mean. If Will has no doubts about Hannibal’s attraction, then Hannibal has no doubts about Will’s in return, nor the intensity of his commitment. He can’t imagine Will would turn his back now.

What is it that he doubts, then? Will has made the allusion to limited time. So if he would not leave of his own volition, what could draw them apart that Will would reasonably fear?

It catches up to Hannibal all at once. Of course it would be no other. Despite Will’s admiration, his supposed obsession, his commendation to the Ripper’s artistry and defense of his intentions, Will is afraid of the Chesapeake Ripper.

Or, in more defined terms, Will is aware of the Ripper’s awareness of *him*.

Hannibal stills in his work as he absorbs this. If he were any other man, Hannibal could not speak of the reaction he would have to the realization that his partner was more preoccupied with the attention of a killer than a lover. But *as* that killer, Hannibal is suddenly, undeniably, viscerally pleased. Will has filled a section of himself with awareness of the Ripper’s mindset. It’s a space that he believes that, as a good man, Hannibal does not fit. He is caught between the two, unknowing they are one and the same. And despite it all, despite the fondness they share, Will has prioritized the Ripper over Hannibal.

How far does it go? Would Will intend to use his lover as a sacrifice, or—?

“I’ve been thinking a lot about death,” Will says softly, and interrupts Hannibal’s reverie, “and what would happen if something happened to me.”

Oh.

Oh?

It’s only years of habitual kitchen work that forces him to remove the bread from the griddle before it burns. The words on his tongue sting more than his fingers. There is an absent ache in his skin from the heat, and it echoes somewhere behind his ribs. “Do you expect to die?”

Will's hands tighten on the cup. It is not a flinch, but it is as good as. "I never expected to do much living," he says. Deflects. "Graduate, take assignments. Get killed in the field, probably, down the line."

The last bit is tacked on as an afterthought, but it is not an afterthought at all. The limited time Will spoke of was not for Hannibal, but for Will himself. He has no intention of going to an active war zone or embroiling himself in a political conflict.

Will expects the Ripper to kill him.

And hasn't mentioned it. Not one bit. No indication that he intends to run, or to fight.

Hannibal reaches for the bread, and spreads a thin layer of mustard over the toast. He operates on autopilot, his brain maintaining several tracks of thought at once: breakfast, conversation, introspection, all. "No thoughts of a happier future? Marriage and family?"

Will goes still and silent. When Hannibal looks at him, Will's eyes are wide. He is soft-mouthed, slow-blinking, the same gutted look of someone unexpectedly struck by a blade, bleeding. "I…" He swallows hard, looks down into his cup. "I don't know. I guess I never thought about it. Never expected it."

Of course he hadn't. Will didn't grow up with attentive family, or with happy circumstances. Neither did Hannibal, but he had no need for them, no want for them. Not until now. Now Will being with him seems to be all he can think about. Creating room within his singular lifestyle for another. An equal.

Will's fingernails click nervously against the glass cup. The overwhelming quiet stretches. Near-whispered, he asks, "What about you?"

"A passing thought," Hannibal answers. He layers fontina atop the mustard, and prosciutto atop the first layer of cheese. Gruyere follows, then the top layer of toast, and a generous slather of béchamel. Provolone. Hannibal puts the sandwiches on a cooking sheet and feigns poise. "Nothing I've ever considered a necessity. Perhaps, given the opportunity, and right set of circumstances; the right place and time."

The right person goes unsaid. But when Hannibal glances up, he sees it in Will's expression:

Want. That same thread of longing, vibrating at a tone nearly audible to human ears. It fills the silence between them, broken only by the quiet bubbling of the saucepan waiting on the corner burner, simmering water and vinegar. Time carries on around them, unbroken, uninterrupted. Their event horizon has already come and gone, but another approaches. Hannibal feels it keenly with a strong sense of anticipation.

What they are is set in stone. What they could become is yet to be seen.

Will averts his eyes. Holds his cup close to his mouth, though Hannibal knows it must be nearly empty. Perhaps he hopes to hide some tell; a tremble in his lips, the way he sometimes sinks his teeth into them when he's deep inside his own head.

"It's a nice thought," Will says softly. His words say yes. His quiet melancholy says no, but not for lack of desire—for lack of belief.

“For the future, perhaps,” Hannibal replies. He keeps his tone light, unassuming, and carefully watches the way Will withdraws on himself. Steps out of the way again as Hannibal passes to put the pan into the wall-mounted oven drawer, and manages to avoid touch under the guise of staying out from underfoot.

Clever, lonely little thing. Solitary by habit, but desperate for connection. Another piece of the puzzle unlocked; a clue, a key to the door of the fortress that is Will Graham. “Maybe,” Will says, and once again deflects. “What are you doing today?”

“First and foremost, making you breakfast,” Hannibal answers with a faint smile, and returns to the rangetop. Let Will think him distracted and mislead; in the meantime, Hannibal has quite a lot of thinking to do. “But this afternoon, I’m shadowing Doctor Chilton in the psychology department to learn more about the work they do.”

Will sets his cup on the counter with an alarmingly loud *clink.* It is empty as expected. His reaction, however, is far from. There is a storm on his face bred anew, silently thundering. “Really,” he says. It’s not a question.

Hannibal bites back a satisfied smirk. Oh, he remembers Will’s private dig at Frederick Chilton in the company of his friend, and remembers the man himself. Selfish to a fault, self-important, eager for oddities. Rather than marveling at the gift of his mentality, Frederick had seen an oddity in Will, where Hannibal had seen a muse. What would Frederick say, knowing Will was the one who got away from his grasping claws, then turned and walked right into Hannibal’s waiting arms?

The vindication is already sweet.

“Yes,” Hannibal answers mildly, and feigns ignorance as he cracks an egg into a waiting ceramic cup, and pours it carefully into the simmering water. He follows it with a second. “If all goes well, I should be starting there in the spring as a resident. I’m touring with another prospective, so I’m not sure how long it’ll take. I should be free by the evening.”

Will’s fingertips thrum on the countertop. He pulls himself away, lip curling with distaste as he goes to retrieve the coffee siphon. “His papers are garbage.”

Hannibal stares at Will’s back. He’s rarely heard Will speak so derisively, aside from his intense dislike of Freddie Lounds. Though Will isn’t wrong—Frederick’s published paper in the recent American Journal of Psychiatry on social exclusion was absolute drivel. Hannibal himself had a rebuttal nearly completed to be looked over by Doctor Du Maurier prior to submission, given the infant stages of his psychiatric career. He is, at least, confident that his understanding of the human condition is fit to exceed Frederick Chilton’s. “I wasn’t aware you read enough journals to have an opinion on such a thing.”

Will shoots a scathing glance over his shoulder. “A peer reviewed process is critical to all fields, Doctor Lecter, as well as impartial, unbiased research. Chilton writes papers only scare-tactic preachers and anti-vaxxing suburban mothers could love. They’re trend pieces, not research.”

Will’s vehemence is… enlightening. Though Hannibal supposes that maybe he shouldn’t be surprised. It does stand to reason that Will’s interest in psychology would extend beyond the Ripper. Especially given that, as memory stands, Will interviewed for, and subsequently turned down a position at Johns Hopkins. How different might their lives have been if he and Will had met as prospective peers?

Perhaps not different at all. Perhaps quite different, indeed.

“Trend pieces,” Hannibal muses. It’s an apt description. “Like Freddie Lounds’ writing is thinly-veiled opinion-based fearmongering disguised as investigative journalism?”

“Yes!” Will exclaims, and turns quickly, eyes wide. “ *Exactly* like that. That’s exactly—” The change, when it comes over Will, is sudden. His open vehemence shutters. His body falls still, his arms deceptively loose at his sides. “What did she say to you?”

Hannibal knows better to insult Will’s intelligence by feigning ignorance. If anyone is qualified to predict Freddie Lounds’ behavior, it’s Will. “Nothing that bears repeating, or any mind,” Hannibal replies. He sidles by to pull the sandwiches from the oven drawer, crispy and golden. Though Will’s eyes follow the motion as Hannibal returns them to the island for the finishing touches, he is not swayed or distracted by the promise of breakfast. Though Hannibal supposes he wouldn’t be particularly interested in Will if he were so fickle. “I assume she faked an injury to get in through the emergency room. Believe me, Will, I spoke with her only briefly, then reported her to hospital security and had her blacklisted for privacy violations and trespassing.”

Will’s head tips to the side, carefully controlled and performatively placid. It’s a gesture Hannibal recognizes, usually attributed to his own reflection. “I believe that you reported her,” Will says softly. “But not that she didn’t say something.”

He takes one step forward, slow and purposeful. Another follows, and Hannibal is given the strange, prickling sensation of being stalked. Hunted. If this were not his own home, his own domain, he’s sure he would like it a lot less. But as it stands, this is a strange and new phenomenon. Something to be savored.

He plates each of the sandwiches, then scoops the eggs from the simmering water with a spoon and trims the edges of the whites. He carefully sets each atop the bed of béchamel and provolone, mindful of Will’s forward progression as he spoons hollandaise over the lot and garnishes with chopped chives. Food complete and ready for consumption, Hannibal can turn his full attention to Will—

Hannibal’s muscles twitch as Will’s hands find his waist from behind, push and slide forward and around until he’s encircled, and presses his body against Hannibal’s back. The hold is possessive; Will’s mouth finds the crest of his shoulder with chaste, nibbling kisses that warm Hannibal’s skin through his shirt.

“Your affection is welcome, mylimasis,” Hannibal murmurs, and lays his hands over the backs of Will’s. “But your worry is unnecessary. Nothing but the words from your own mouth will change my opinion of you.”

“But you admit she tried.” Will’s lips smooth a path back and forth, over and over. Patient—in theory. But the move speaks of something more animal, more base, as Will noses at the bite mark he’d left the night before.

Hannibal hums quietly in reply. He is not accustomed to being held, as opposed to doing the holding. The presence of someone at his back is enough to raise alarms in his brain, but knowing it is someone trusted is a balm to that frisson of instinctual discontent. This moment, this *gesture*, holds the same weight as the memory of fingers sliding into his hair, Will leaning up against his side. Possession—companionship. All the same things Hannibal wishes from Will, and that Will wishes from him while they are together. All the things that the threat of Freddie Lounds’ interference in Will’s life brings to the surface.

Someday Hannibal will teach him that even foxes can be made prey if the predator is smart enough. Vulpines are scavengers; he and Will are the apex of their kind.

“She tried,” Hannibal replies, and Will’s arms tighten reflexively around him. “But she went about it in the most inefficient way possible. She plays the part of worried peer well, but anyone who knows you would see through her lies.”

Will stays silent; Hannibal can feel his rabbiting pulse in a dead sprint against his back. He curls his fingers around the backs of Will’s hands, strokes them with his thumbs in an effort to comfort.

“You know me better than most,” Will says softly. And amends, “Than anyone.”

The pleasure of that statement is fierce, prideful. But yes, Hannibal knew that. He has made it his singular goal. He now has the unique opportunity to test the waters of Will’s mind. What better way to do it than to lay out his knowledge as a supposition, and see whether Will denies it?

“She tried to warn me away from you by saying you were more committed to your killer than you are to me.” Will stiffens—truth.

“That you’re using me solely to obtain information upon his whereabouts, and that you plan to ruin me when you have what you need.” Will’s hands clench, and the crescents of his nails dig into the sensitive flesh of Hannibal’s belly. His teeth bare against Hannibal’s shoulder in silent outrage. Ah, then that’s a lie. He knew as much.

“And you date around to acquire information, but don’t care about anyone you see, myself included. No commitments or attachments.” Will’s forehead insistently nudges against his shoulder—hiding his face. Perhaps there’s some truth to that, as well.

Will’s chest swells against Hannibal’s back with the force of his long, low inhale and exhale. It forces them closer together, and Will’s embrace grows tighter. Slowly, patiently, Hannibal frees one of Will’s grasping hands and lifts it to his mouth, kisses the backs of his fingers and lets his mouth linger.

“Didn’t say anything worth mentioning?” Will asks, so soft and low. He sounds furious, but not at Hannibal. Dangerous, but not to him. Flexing his claws, sharpening his teeth, clinging jealously to what’s his. Hannibal is content to be counted among Will’s most treasured possessions.

“I didn’t think so, no,” Hannibal answers. “Unless you think there’s truth to what she’s said to me.”

“No,” Will snaps. Then he is silent. His hand in Hannibal’s shirt softens to a broad palm, searching fingers, slides over linen and buttons until it splays across Hannibal’s stomach. Will echoes his motion, rubbing soothing, instinctual circles with his thumb. It almost tickles, but Hannibal doesn’t laugh. Instead, the warmth of it is stimulating. He can feel the echo of Will’s touch on his skin, the electric spark of his slow, sensual attention. “...well.”

Hannibal waits.

“I have other sources,” Will admits. “But no one who is anything to me like you. We get coffee or drinks. We talk. They’re not dates.”

Hannibal hums quietly. “I believe you,” he says, because of course he does. “But perhaps we can make the same progress as your sources. I think I could be happy with leveling that particular playing field.”

Will frowns against his skin; he makes a confused little sound, and his chin rests atop Hannibal’s shoulder. He turns his head to see the furrow in Will’s brow, the perplexed and puppyish tilt of his head, the mess of his wild curls loosely held by the plastic clip. He is vulnerable, uncertain, and

though the angle of his neck is far from comfortable, Hannibal kisses him. Slow, sensual press of lips; a flash of tongue. Will is the one to break it, and rests his temple against Hannibal's jaw. He frees his hand, and his arm loops around Hannibal's chest.

"Coffee," Hannibal clarifies. "Lunch, dinner. Outings together, away from the hospital and our homes. Steps we seem not to have managed ourselves." He takes Will's hand and settles it over his heart, a silent implication that skirts the line of reality and possibility. He feels the heat in Will's cheeks against his own as he receives the silent missive, the slide as Will's fingers curl into a fist, gripping the front of his shirt. Claiming.

"Oh," Will murmurs.

"Unless you're opposed?"

"No, I'm not, I…" Will nuzzles him, his cheek, his jaw, the curve of his throat. "That'd be nice."

"I agree." And from there, they can move forward. The thought is satisfying. What he wants with Will is something no one else will ever have. It only makes sense to take each of those steps before they proceed. But in the meantime… "Put your enemies from your mind, Will. It is only us here. Breakfast is ready. I recall you saying you were hungry."

Will laughs a little. Sighs. Forces his body to relax, to let go. "Starving," he murmurs. He tucks his face into the crook of Hannibal's neck, nudges his collar out of the way with his nose, and presses his lips to skin. "What did you make me?"

"French café-faire, in a sense." Hannibal taps Will's wrists and he disengages, unwinds himself from Hannibal's body and tucks himself under his arm. Hip-to-hip, shoulder-to-shoulder, Will looks perfectly at home here. It is exactly where he belongs. "Croque Madame is usually a grilled ham and cheese on peasant bread, topped with a fried egg. I ate it many times when I lived in Paris as a boy. Now, for a richer flavor, I substitute the peasant bread with brioche, the ham with prosciutto, and top with Eggs Benedict and hollandaise."

Will looks up. He leans his head against Hannibal's shoulder, content in his embrace, and for a time, he simply looks. That wistful resonance is back, but Hannibal allows Will his time—whatever thoughts occupy Will's mind, he will eventually flush them out and lay them bare. Lay Will bare, with heated skin and wild hair, free of denim and cheap lace, or even silk and finery. Until it is simply them, stripped to their most basic selves. Until even the layer of Hannibal's civility is peeled away, and they can simply *be.*

At long last, Will lifts on his tiptoes and presses his mouth to the apple of Hannibal's cheek. "Thank you," he says, and Hannibal knows he is not only talking about breakfast and coffee. Every time he says his thanks, it always sounds like goodbye. And if Hannibal cannot convince Will himself that their time together will not be shortened, then it seems the Ripper will have to be the one to convince him. Slowly. Carefully. Gently coaxing, until the reality of the matter catches up to Will's worries and snuffs them out with the force of the truth.

Nothing will separate them. Not Freddie Lounds, not Frederick Chilton, not the Chesapeake Ripper, nor Will himself. Hannibal will not allow it to be so.

"My pleasure, mylimasis. Shall we adjourn to the dining room?"

"Yes, please," Will says. He lifts the plate and inhales; an intrigued animal noise escapes from behind his teeth, instinctively tempted by sight and scent. Will licks his lips. Pauses. Looks back at him and

sheepishly smiles. “You’re going to spoil me.”

Plate in one hand, the other settles on Will’s lower back, and in this moment, Hannibal has almost everything he could hope to possess. *Almost* everything. “I certainly hope so.”

Chapter End Notes

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2:5

Chapter Notes

~~/shakes will and hannibal relentlessly~~
i swear to god when i get these two to obey me and actually go and do the plot, it's over for you, dear readers

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Are you going to stand there and watch?” He glances at Hannibal’s reflection in the bathroom mirror, his brush faltering in its path as Will paints foundation onto his face, hair pulled back and bangs clipped away from his forehead. He’d come prepared, fortunately—had a bag packed in the back of his car with a change of clothes (somewhat wrinkled but passable) and his touch up kit. It’s his saving grace today, since Fridays are filming days for the campus news, and without driving all the way back to Wolf Trap, he would have been otherwise unprepared.

It’s not the full extent of his usual setup, but it’ll do. Though Hannibal leaning back against the doorway and watching with sharp eyes and rapt interest is proving to be a distraction.

Hannibal’s hair is still damp from his shower, combed back; his suit is an attractive deep blue with a thin and subtle stripe, well-tailored, with a crisp white shirt beneath. A simple pair of pearl-inlaid cufflinks bind the two together. His tie is eye-catching and borders on horrendous, blue paisley threaded with accents of bright orange. It’s truly unfair, Hannibal’s innate ability to make anything look sleek and debonair. God, the slacks and waistcoat had been bad enough, but *this?*

Hannibal tips his head back against the side jamb, his posture relaxed, leonine, nearly regal. He smiles, and his eyes find Will’s in the mirror, rich as cognac. “Does it bother you?”

Will huffs and tears his gaze away. Steadies his hand and blends the streaks out, hides the faint redness of his fresh shave beneath his concealer. He won’t be the only one in makeup today; even his more conventional male classmates use foundation to avoid unflattering face shine in the newsroom. “I don’t usually have an audience.”

Hannibal hums in quiet amusement, satisfaction. “It’s a process like anything else, but I’ll admit it’s not one that I’m familiar with.”

Will switches to his brow pencil. He keeps his brows carefully maintained, but a little definition certainly never hurt anyone, especially when dealing with the cameras. “Never watched your mother put makeup on in the morning?”

“If I did, I don’t recall it. By the time I lived with my aunt and uncle, I was in my teens and thought myself far too important to be concerned with something so mundane.” The way he says it is humored, gently self-deprecating. It’s clear from his attention now that he finds the process anything but *mundane*—or perhaps it’s just his fascination with Will. It’s impossible to tell.

Hannibal maintains his distance, but his presence is commanding. Will can sense him near, even if he doesn't touch. Almost wishes he would, so his skin would stop buzzing in anticipation. "I'm honored you find me so interesting," Will drawls with a faint hint of sarcasm. Caps the pencil and trades it for a small shadow palette, subtly smoky tones of grey and a black tone rich with shimmer. It's strange to see his makeup spread across the immaculate bathroom counter. Strange to be standing in the halls of Hannibal's home and painting himself into Wilhelmina's image under his supervision.

Light colors on the inside corners of his eyes, blended outward into dark. Will is silent with concentration; still, his hands nearly tremble under the force of Hannibal's regard. He wants to tell him to go. Wants him to stay. Isn't really sure what he wants, but *definitely* doesn't want to do this twice.

"Everything you do is interesting to me, mylimasis. It's part of who you are. I watch what you do, I learn more about you."

Will frowns and glances at him in the mirror. "Don't you ever turn your brain off and live in the moment?"

Hannibal tilts his head. There's a glint in his eyes, a wry tilt to his lips. "I live in every moment. That requires me to be present." Then, a flicker of interest. "Do you consider living in the moment to mean feeling and acting without thinking?"

Will groans quietly and averts his gaze. "New rule: no psychoanalyzing before I put my eyeliner on."

Hannibal chuckles. "Of course, darling, my apologies."

Will's cheeks flare pink as he picks up the ink pen. He scowls at his reflection, and takes a steadying breath. Liquid eyeliner is unforgiving. He leans in close to the mirror; *tsks* at having to do this without magnification, and the lighting is all wrong in here, and it's not what he's used to and Hannibal is just being *Hannibal,* and—

"I can step out if you'd prefer."

Will takes another breath and exhales slowly. The offer is… reassuring, somehow. Will licks his lips, shakes his head. "It's just not my usual setup." He readjusts and sets the felt tip at his lash line, sweeps slowly outward, then traces over it again; darkens the line, the subtle wing tip as he gentles the pressure.

Will glances up; Hannibal blinks slowly at him in the reflection, head tilted as he surveys. His expression is blank, but Will pauses at the fondness he sees there in Hannibal's eyes. The quiet consideration. Hannibal watches the movement of his hands as intently as he had the night before, watching Will with the knife.

Will swallows. Switches to the other eye, tongue pressed against his teeth. The back of his neck tingles. It is only once Will's finished that Hannibal speaks again. Will is pleased but unsurprised by the man's courtesy. "Speaking of mothers—" Will winces, and Hannibal, of course, notices, "—I'm curious as to how you learned these techniques in the absence of one."

"Like any other girl, I expect," Will murmurs, and caps the pen. Puts on mascara from the travel-sized tube, almost empty. "Magazines, practice. Now there's entire YouTube tutorials on the internet, but those weren't around when I was a kid, and I never really had time to look up anything like that, anyway."

“Your father was supportive?” Hannibal asks. He doesn’t sound doubtful as one might expect; instead, politely interested.

“Much as he could be,” Will answers. He sets the tube down, rubs the back of his neck. Twists the flyaway curls that have escaped from his bun around his finger. He pulls up the hem of his thigh-length black sweater and pulls a bobby pin from the belt loop of his houndstooth-print pants (another hand-me-down from Margot. *Last season,* she’d said, and yet Will has seen her wear another pair just like them since then). Secures them, moves on. He’s too pale for most bronzers, so he uses the lightest shade of contour powder he can find in the hollows of his cheeks, at his hairline to round his face, brushes it on the sides of his nose to accent the bridge. Ignores the distant, aching throb in his chest at the memory of his father, the thought of his ruined jacket. “I don’t think he got it, really, but he didn’t argue. Asked questions. But mostly he just cared that I worked hard and respected people, that I could take care of myself and defend myself if I needed. I think even if I’d been a proper daughter, I probably wouldn’t be that different than I am.”

Hannibal is quiet for a moment. Considering. Watches as Will dusts pink blush over his cheekbones, shimmery gold highlighter up toward his temples. “Would you have preferred being a *proper daughter*, Will?”

Will pauses. Frowns. He turns his back to the reflection to face Hannibal properly. There’s so much weight to that question, and to the answer. Would he prefer to be female? Some days he thinks he might, but others certainly not.

“I don’t know,” he answers. Slides the toe of his sock back and forth across tile, and watches Hannibal watch him. “I don’t hate being born male, and I don’t really have dysphoria about my body most of the time. I just…” Will leans back against the sink, hands curled around the edge of the countertop. “I like the routine. I like the way it makes me feel, but only when I want to do it. I don’t always. And I know it’s societal capitalist bullshit that convinced women that makeup can make them feel empowered for being pretty when they’re basically spending their money to become objectified, but… maybe I’ve been conditioned into believing it’s true. Guess I’m not sure.”

Will shrugs uneasily and Hannibal pushes off the doorway, crosses the small space until they stand close. He slides his knuckle under Will’s chin and tips his face up. Will flushes under the full force of his attention, as Hannibal takes in the detail of Will’s work up close. His thumb skims up Will’s chin, to the only part of him still untouched by pigment. The pad of his thumb brushes over Will’s lips, slick and soft but for the subtle ridge of the scab there. Hannibal touches it with the edge of his nail, his own lips parted in sympathetic response.

Sometimes Will thinks the magnetism between them might be dangerous. Already it’s pulled Will into a world he doesn’t belong in, with the promise of a place to stay and a hand to hold, Hannibal unknowing of the darkness that lingers beneath his skin. But the stronger part of him, the prouder part, bids him to lift his head and preen. Take pride in Hannibal’s fascination with him, and keep him until the very end. Will knows he looks good like this. There’s no sense in acting like he’s unaware when it’s what brought them together, and when Hannibal’s appreciation for fine aesthetics is so prevalent in everything he does.

In the end, Will is selfish. His shoulders relax, and he leans back on his hands against the counter with all the casual ease he’d imagine of Wilhelmina, and meets Hannibal’s eyes without shame or fear. Emboldened, Will asks, “Would you prefer me as a woman?”

Hannibal touches the scab again. Catches the edge of it with a quiet *click*. It stings, but Will doesn’t wince. Neither does Hannibal pull it free, though there is an almost imperceptible pull between his brows, an intentness to his face that whispers *he wants to, he wants to.* Will nearly smiles; Hannibal

is a curious man, he seeks what he desires with single-minded focus. The tendency to poke and pick at things, with blood sometimes as a side-effect. They have that in common. “Biological sex is irrelevant. I’m certain I’d be drawn to you regardless. I prefer *you,* Will, body and mind.”

“Good to know,” Will murmurs against the pressure of his thumb. Lifts his head and leans forward, and catches the pleased expression on Hannibal’s face as Will instigates the touch of their lips. They both have to be going soon, and there’s little time for them to linger, but Will’s hands find his waist on instinct, feel the solidness of his body beneath the wool jacket. The suit is fine, luxurious, so Will treats it gently; doesn’t grip or pull the way he’d like to, but fortunately Hannibal seems willing to crowd Will against the sink without much help.

Hands under his thighs, the sense of zero-gravity, the clatter of glass bottles and tubes tipping into the porcelain basin as Hannibal hoists him onto the counter. Will’s thighs part and Hannibal sinks between them, sinks his tongue between Will’s lips and licks his teeth. Will’s chest flutters when Hannibal smooths his hands over Will’s sweater, hips to waist to chest, up over his shoulders and back down Will’s arms. He hums his approval into Will’s mouth, moans it as Will nips at his lower lip, and the sound makes Will’s belly pulse and flare hot with want.

Hannibal pulls back. His eyes are burning with satisfaction, and with questions. “That’s a very fine garment. Cashmere?”

“Could be,” Will murmurs. Nuzzles Hannibal’s cheek and inhales tasteful aftershave, rubs his lips against a sharp jawline with an almost feline sense of contentment. “It was a gift from a friend, like most of my wardrobe.”

For a second, there is quiet. Then Hannibal makes an alarmingly small, sharp noise. He tips his head away from Will’s affections, wraps his hands around Will’s wrists and pulls his touch away. The rejection stings, and Will is left with curling fingers, touching nothing. Hannibal isn’t rough, doesn’t hurt him, but it’s a denial Will has never faced before, and that more than anything is what hurts.

“What?” Will asks, wounded and uncertain of what exactly he’s done wrong.

Hannibal’s frown is small but deep. “You protest my gifts but accept them from others?”

Is he serious? It takes Will only a moment to realize that yes, he is. Hannibal looks truly upset, but Will can’t help it: he snorts in response, and is faced with an irritable scowl. “Hannibal, stealing my bank information and putting five thousand dollars in my account isn’t a gift, it’s—it’s just—very generous identity theft.” There’s a flicker in his eyes like he’s not quite sure what Will means, doesn’t see the distinction. Of course he doesn’t. Will shakes his head and turns his hands in Hannibal’s grip, touches Hannibal’s hand that keeps him gently, carefully restrained with his fingertips. “Gifts are something you offer, Hannibal. Something given and accepted.”

Hannibal’s frown tempers with understanding and calculation. “So if I were to offer you gifts, you would accept them?”

Will realizes with great reluctance the opening he’s just left. He swallows. Hannibal seems satisfied at this particular turn-around, the smug bastard. He releases his hold on Will’s wrists but maintains eye contact, silent pressure, and in this moment Will wishes Hannibal didn’t understand him quite so well. “That’s *not* what I meant.”

“Regardless, it’s what *I* meant,” he replies. “Gifts are a traditional part of a courtship. Would you allow me to give them to you?”

Will balks to hear it laid so simply—*courtship.* Oh god, he really is serious. Will's lips part, and Hannibal's pupils dilate. The space between them is charged as Hannibal dips his head forward, their lips just shy of touching. Will wishes they could just keep kissing and not talk about this sort of thing. Damn him. "I, um."

"Nothing extravagant," Hannibal says, though the glint in his eyes says *at first.* "Tokens, trinkets, things that make me think of you. Would you accept them?"

Will wants to hide his face against Hannibal's shoulder. The desire wars with the fact that he'd inevitably get makeup on a suit that absolutely costs more than this damn sweater. Spite tells him to do it anyway, but Will resists. Barely. He averts his eyes, sinks his teeth into his lip and worries at the scab there.

The idea of Hannibal spending money on him is so unsettling, uncomfortable, and it makes Will's skin crawl. He thinks of his father, his childhood, rationing food and funds for gasoline to drive the truck to and from work at the dock; homeschool, scraping for textbooks, but mostly Will self-educating with the use of a dog-eared library card. Thrift stores, hand-me-downs. Will only accepts them from Margot because she assures she'd be donating them anyway, and he knows her well enough to accept that's true. But *gifts*…

Will curses that he'd even mentioned the word. But Hannibal is tenacious. And, Will realizes with a sigh, he is going to do exactly what he wants, precisely whenever he wants to do it. Will's bank account is proof of that.

Frustrating, stubborn man.

"Nothing extravagant," Will warns, and sets his jaw. "And no more surprise deposits, or I swear I'll change banks. Don't think I won't."

"Oh, I have no doubt," Hannibal replies. He is so visibly, stupidly pleased, and Will wants to hit him a little. He doesn't, but he scowls. Hannibal smiles wider for seeing it, leans in for a kiss that Will turns his cheek to deny him. Hannibal chuckles at the snub, in good humor at his decisive, manipulative victory. Asshole. "You're the only person I've met who doesn't want to be given things."

"And you still keep trying to give them," Will complains, well-aware that he's acting childish and not giving a damn. "Alright, you win, let me down. I need to finish up so I can go to class, and you need to go…" he grimaces, "have your meeting with Chilton."

Hannibal makes a sound of assent and holds out his hand for Will to take. Though irritated at the smugness that radiates from him, Will obliges as he slips from the counter and into Hannibal's arms. "I'll give you some time. Would you like coffee to take with you?"

The thought's appealing; Hannibal's coffee is fantastic. Will is reluctantly appeased. "That'd be nice, thanks."

Hannibal kisses the crown of his head and smooths a hand over Will's hair, and despite himself, a wave of affection floods Will's heart. Stupid, overbearing, selfishly generous man. Will's lucky to have him. Impossibly lucky. "I'll prepare some for you. Don't be long."

From the moment he leaves the room, Will notices his absence. It feels like something inside him is intrinsically missing. Will is almost glad, in that moment, that he's certain to die before he ever knows what it is to have Hannibal leave him for good.

Satisfaction is the primary emotion at the forefront of Hannibal's mind as he passes the kitchen and heads for his study. A battle won in the long war of wills between them, every step forward on their path together is rife with the feeling of success.

Hannibal heads with purpose to his desk and opens the right hand drawer. Among his many carefully organized drawing utensils is a gray felt box. He lifts it out, closes the drawer.

Oh, Will is going to be so angry. And yet, Hannibal can't seem to think of that fact with anything less than amused and fond anticipation.

The gift is nothing large, but it's the principle of the thing. Not only because Will is about to have insight to the nature of Hannibal's demand, but twice as irritated that he'd just given permission and no longer has reason to turn away Hannibal's offering.

Hannibal returns with it to the kitchen, and sets it on the island while he prepares the travel mug. It will be the first thing Will sees when he enters the room. Whatever reaction he has will be framed in the doorway to the heart of Hannibal's home, front and center to be locked into his mind palace.

He's not disappointed.

Will freezes in the threshold, very still—a statue in black cashmere and houndstooth print, curls loose around his shoulders and dripping into his eyes, matte lipstick as red as blood, eyes the color of wild and untamed seas. He is the very picture of indulgence. His gaze lingers on the box. Then his eyes shutter closed. He exhales through his nose, slow and measured but with force, a sound in his throat that is not unlike the echo of a silent scream.

Hannibal is delighted. He says nothing, and waits the long moments while sipping at his own cup for Will to come to the end of his mental and emotional gymnastics.

"You bastard," Will murmurs, and opens his eyes. "I should have known."

Hannibal fondly receives Will's look of utter exasperation and exhaustion, and in the recesses of his mind, a small and insistent voice whispers its want to be on the other end of that look for another decade, another five. Hannibal has rarely found such satisfaction in riling anyone as he does in agitating Will, drawing his most pure and visceral emotions to the gates of his mental fortress.

He doesn't smile, but it's a near thing. And still, Will adds, "Quit your grinning, I can see it in your eyes," as he strides forward and picks up the box. His hand trembles finely, and he hesitates in opening it.

"It's not so bad as whatever you're imagining," Hannibal says, and no longer restrains his smile. He places the cup down on the counter beside the one he prepared for Will, and rounds the kitchen island. Places himself at Will's back, settles his hands on Will's hunched shoulders and gently kneads them into submission. He places his lips at Will's ear. "May as well get it over with, mylimasis. No sense in torturing yourself."

"I'd settle for torturing *you,*" Will replies crossly. A flare of fierce pride and pleasure winds around Hannibal's heart at the thought, and Will opens the box.

The earrings are tasteful, classic. A pair of pearl studs, nested in delicate white-gold filigree—the very edges sparkle and shimmer with diamond chips, accentuating but not overwhelming. Hannibal had been quite pleased with himself at the purchase, prior to coming to the realization that he would have to find both a time and a way to actually *gift* them. Maneuvering Will proved to be a challenge, but one well worth the reward.

Will's sigh is soft, shaken but appreciative. It's enough for Hannibal to know he likes them, whether or not be feels he should accept them. He sets his cheek against Will's temple and slips his hand around Will's, holding and supporting. His pearl cufflinks catch the light, and Hannibal smiles. "I thought we might match."

"They're beautiful," Will whispers. Turns just barely to cast Hannibal a sidelong glance. "When did you…?"

"I hoped they might replace the pair you wore last time, when I visited you at school," Hannibal replies, brushing his lips over Will's soft earlobe and the raised ridge of scar tissue from the piercing.

Will makes a quiet sound of disbelief. "But that was before we even—"

"Yes it was." He delights at Will's shiver, the way he leans into the warmth of Hannibal's mouth against his skin. "I knew almost immediately after meeting you what I hoped for our future, Will. I am blessed and fortunate that the chips have fallen this way."

"You're impossible," Will says. There is a smile in his voice. "A menace, Hannibal, do you hear me?"

Hannibal laughs under his breath. "Yes, dear."

"I can't believe you."

"And I hope that never changes, so I may continue to surprise you." He kisses Will's temple, his shimmery cheek, murmurs his approval when Will turns into it and kisses him once on the lips, deep and lingering.

When Will pulls back, his face is flushed, eyes glimmering beneath thick, dark lashes and the wisps of his curled bangs. He reaches up and tucks his hair behind one ear, and leans into Hannibal when he says, "Help me put them in?"

Head tipped up and to the side, throat exposed, Will waits with quiet expectancy as Hannibal frees one post from the felted box. Watching the blunted wire push through Will's skin wells a strange, visceral thickness on Hannibal's tongue. It's a smooth entry, not unlike a blade or a needle, though Will gives no indication that it hurts. The back of the earring clips onto the post with a satisfying little *snap,* and Will tilts his head for Hannibal to do the next. His surgeon's fingers are strong and steady as he secures the other, then brushes them down the sides of Will's neck and across the graceful curve of his shoulders.

"Beautiful," Hannibal says, unprompted. And then, with a self-deprecating smile, "How much of your lipstick am I wearing right now?"

Will grins. Leans up and kisses him again, laughs against his mouth, and whatever the amount of red smeared across his skin, he may as well consider it practice, preparation for a different shade of scarlet they may someday share between them—

“None,” Will says through bared white teeth, and snags Hannibal’s lower lip between them. Nips, and darts away, out of his arms, and snatches up the coffee Hannibal prepared for him with eager, childish greed. “Matte liquid lipstick. It’s a brave new world, Doctor Lecter.”

Hannibal feels the loss of him with terrible fondness and growing, gnawing hunger. “It does seem that way.” Will’s eyes flutter closed with satisfied bliss at the coffee on his tongue, a lovely little temptation that Hannibal would gladly catch and carry upstairs if he thought he could get away with it. But the day’s meeting holds too much weight over his future for Hannibal to discount it, even for the sake of indulging in Will. “I’m afraid I have to leave if I’m to make it on time to this meeting.”

Will hums his acknowledgement, eyes slit open and glimmering like jewels over the stainless rim of the travel mug. As promised, his lips leave not so much as a smear on the surface. “Yeah,” he agrees reluctantly, “I should go too.”

There is something Hannibal can’t quantify or describe about standing in his kitchen in finery and socks and kissing Will Graham. It seems like something so far divorced from the life he’s known to this point. It should be alien, unconscionable. But it’s undeniably reality as Will puts the cup down and holds out his hand, draws Hannibal in with a siren’s song and Venus’ divine beauty and kisses him one last time.

“I have to catch up on my work this weekend,” Will murmurs. “For real. So if you miss me, just call me, ok? No more surprises.”

Hannibal hums with amusement. “If you insist.”

They wander hand in hand to the doorway, Will’s belongings already present and ready to be stored away in his car. Hannibal hands off the felt box and watches carefully as Will kneels to tuck it into his messenger bag. His work boots clash terribly with his current outfit, but Will huffs a laugh when he points it out and mumbles something about his heels staying in the back of the car for filming days, not unlike Hannibal’s own go-bag for when he’s on call.

He helps Will into the borrowed coat, slate-colored wool with a belted waist, and contemplates how best to incorporate a wider variety of accessories into Will’s wardrobe. One thing at a time, of course —first and foremost, Will’s father’s coat is safely sequestered at the cleaner’s awaiting the decision on whether or not it can be saved. All things in good time, he tells himself. All things, Will included.

They part in the driveway, travel mugs set atop their respective vehicles for one final goodbye. Will slides his hand into Hannibal’s hair and kisses him, holds him with the confidence and authority that his makeup seems to give him. In his touch, Hannibal feels a self-assurance that he hopes to nurture, to help to grow.

“I’m really glad I came to yell at you,” Will says against his mouth, shining in the cool mid-morning light. “And that money is going into my savings where I am never, ever gonna touch it except to buy all your future birthday gifts with your own money, okay? That’s what you get.”

“Use it however you see fit,” Hannibal answers, warmed by the idea of he and Will together well into the future. He has no care for what Will does with the funds; money is something he has plenty of, between his generous salary and careful investments. The deposit, while to assure his state of mind about Will’s well-being, was primarily to get his attention. It has more than served its purpose. “But do feed yourself and pay your bills, Will.”

“My account should be straightened out by Monday.”

Hannibal makes a droll, amused noise. “Ah, I see. So this is goodbye, and come your fame and fortune unlocked, I will never see you again. I understand.”

Will’s lips part in shock, and he gently punches Hannibal in the shoulder. “Not funny.”

“Is it not?” Hannibal teases, and feels a dark wave of amusement in his chest when he adds, “Perhaps you and the Ripper are in this together.” Will’s blank stare is enough for Hannibal to pick at him further. “Though perhaps his planning isn’t the best, if he can’t anticipate the consequences of placing a victim in such a public location. Perhaps you should be calling the shots.”

“You’re insane,” Will says, and casts Hannibal a wide-eyed glance that’s twisted in with a complicated smile.

“So it’s been said. But I think there’s some wisdom to my theory, don’t you?” Hannibal replies. Steps closer, backs Will up against the rear bumper of his station wagon. Brushes back his hair and takes in the sight of those lovely little earrings and their undiluted aesthetic when combined with Will. “He should be so lucky to have your mind on his side,” Hannibal adds quietly, intently, “but I’ll count myself luckier yet for having you with me.”

“You should count yourself lucky we’re alive at all for you to be making those kinds of jokes,” Will snaps; and then his eyes widen. Immediately, his jaw clicks shut. He stands in silent, petrified stillness. Waits for a negative reaction—one that will never come.

“Jokes, perhaps,” Hannibal replies, and studies Will carefully. “But you are the only thing standing between the Chesapeake Ripper being damned as a demon. Your passionate speech and impersonal analysis.” Hannibal touches Will’s cheek; lets it fall, until his hand slips under the collar of Will’s jacket and his palm rests against Will’s heart. “One might think he would be thankful, Will. If that accident was truly not what he intended, then you have turned the tide of his reputation.”

“Are you defending him?” Will demands, confused and breathless and equally accusatory. He is still with his back against the car, and in his bafflement, does not seem to entirely notice where he is. Consumed, entirely, with seeking his answers.

Hannibal slowly looks up, lifts his brows. “Aren’t you?”

Will is silent. His eyes fix on Hannibal’s tie, not his eyes. His voice, when it comes, is uncertain. “I don’t deny his crimes. He kills people. He’s still a murderer.”

Hannibal blinks. Will sounds as though he is convincing himself more than Hannibal, and isn’t that just fascinating?

“Yes,” Hannibal replies, ever-patient, “but I see a great deal of artless, meaningless death. As terrible as murder is to the minds of society…” Hannibal carefully considers how to word his thoughts. “I believe there’s a certain lack of grace in those who are hit by cars, or who drown in their swimming pools in their own backyards, compared to those who are hand-chosen for death and made into something more than a bloated corpse in a shallow grave.”

Will swallows with such force Hannibal feels it in his chest. “Not all murder is created equal? I…” Will too hesitates. Laughs once, but without humor. “Most would argue all death holds equal weight, no matter how it comes about. It’s still a loss of life.”

“Life will always be lost. There’s no shame in death, Will. I don’t fear death, and nor should you.” Will’s eyes rise to his, catch and hold as Hannibal curls his fingers in the lapel of Will’s coat. “The

tragedy is not to die, but to be wasted. When we are taken before our time and see our potential cut short. But, I think…" Hannibal licks his lips, tastes Will on them. He sees Will's aching desperation staring at him, keening for reassurance for the fears he's not yet voiced and never will. "You asked me once if I thought the Ripper would read your articles. And not long before that, you told me you thought he was lonely, and wanted someone to share his kills with. I know it's a terrifying prospect, mylimasis, but you see him in a way no one else does. Perhaps he's chosen you."

Will's lips part. His brow furrows, head tilts, like a new facet of a discovery has been unveiled to him and he is skeptical of its lustre. "Chosen me?"

"As a witness," Hannibal clarifies carefully. "Even the most holy of God's avenging angels are not beautiful, Will. There's a reason, when they descend from Heaven, the first thing they say to those who behold them is—"

"*Be not afraid* ," Will whispers.

Hannibal nods.

For a moment, there is silence. Only the sound of distant cars passing, sirens half a mile away, and the steam of Will's breath in the air. Hannibal takes in the subtle changes of his face—a furrow of his brow, the soundless press and part of his painted lips, the distant other-place stare as he looks *through* Hannibal's chest, rather than at it. To watch from the outside the inner workings of Will's mind is a mechanical marvel, not just a mental one.

Will is shaken.

When he snaps free of his reverie, he reaches for Hannibal's arms—steadies himself, as though the car at his back is not enough. "What if you're wrong?" Will says softly, and does not meet Hannibal's eyes. "What if being seen makes me a threat?"

"I have no doubt you're threatening to him," Hannibal replies, and Will hastily looks up at him with raw, unpolished fear. Clumsy, a blunt instrument, not yet refined. Hannibal sighs and touches Will's hair, and Will leans into him in search of that kindness. "But in his position, I'd imagine many things are a threat to him. As you've said, he is a smart but solitary creature. He may seek to test your intentions, Will, but very few in this world can stand to be isolated forever. I think he's more apt to seek a sympathetic and an empathetic mind."

Will pushes his cheek into Hannibal's palm. His pulse flutters so rapidly that Hannibal can see the twitch of his jugular in his neck, quick as the wings of a bird. "Doesn't that worry you?"

"For your safety, yes. You do seem to be accident-prone," Hannibal answers, and receives a halfhearted slap to his shoulder that bears no sting. He smiles wryly. "But you told me the night we met about your fascination, Will. You've mentioned it often. It seems we both are attracted to curious minds and the marvels of psychology. So long as you stay alive and well, I can't begrudge you that."

Will pushes away from his car, steps into Hannibal's arms. He carefully avoids touching his face to Hannibal's clothing as he accepts the offered embrace. "So I have your blessing."

"You don't need my blessing, Will. Your freedom is your own." Hannibal slips one hand down his back and is gratified when Will shivers. He turns his head and presses his lips to Will's ear, feels the chill of the earring brush his cheek. "Promise me something, though."

Will nods, trusting without even yet hearing what it is he wants. Quiet vindication fills his chest, and doting affection. *Trust me above all others, and neither of us will ever be alone.*

"Just in case anything should happen," Hannibal says in a tentative murmur, and Will stiffens, "please keep me apprised of your investigation. If I'm in the dark, I won't know where to look for you."

Will backs away slowly, out of his arms. His smile is small and pained, and Hannibal knows what he is thinking: if Will ever disappears at the hands of the Ripper, it's because he will never again be found alive. And if Hannibal knows what Will knows, then that puts him at risk.

"I promise," Will lies.

Hannibal nods once, steady and solemn. Yes, he expected as much.

Will takes a breath. He turns to collect his bag from the frozen ground, graceless and uncaring in his fine wardrobe and worn work boots. "Okay," Will says, and swallows. "We both have to go, for real this time."

He opens the trunk and tosses things in without care or concern. Hannibal catches sight of sleek, familiar high heels; the underside of the black sole is embossed with a small number *10.5.* Will closes the rear of the car and turns, reaches out forcefully and impatiently like he hadn't been so soft and vulnerable just moments before (and always is where the Ripper is concerned) and snags Hannibal by the sleeve. He tips his chin expectantly for a kiss, and it's with great amusement that Hannibal obliges him for a swift meeting of lips. A quick peck and nothing more—Hannibal just as suddenly finds himself alone, and Will climbing into the driver's seat, and the travel mug still atop the roof of his car.

The engine roars. The window opens. Will sticks his head out with a complicated frown, a manic light in his eyes. "Hey," he says, and Hannibal quirks a brow. "Don't listen to anything Chilton says about me, okay? He's a hack. Just. Don't talk about me at all, ideally."

Hannibal resists a snort; such a thing would be uncouth. He hums fondly as he plucks the cup from its place and rounds the car, holds it out with an amused tilt of his lips. "You forgot something."

Will sighs. His frenetic energy seems to cool as he reaches up to accept the forgotten offering; holds Hannibal's hand in his own as he uses the other to set it in the cup holder. Hannibal watches in interest, in fascination as Will leans against the inside of the car door and lowers his face to Hannibal's open hand. Presses his forehead against it, his feathery-soft bangs, trails the cold tip of his nose from Hannibal's palmar arch to his radial artery. With gentle fingers, Will pushes the cuff of his coat sleeve aside—his lips part, scarlet red, and touch the tender inside of Hannibal's wrist.

Each touch of Will's mouth and stutter of his breath is a live wire, electricity eagerly received by his own nervous system and amplified. When Will hums against his skin, the sound feeds directly into Hannibal's belly. Nourishes him, sustains him, and for a moment, every part of Hannibal is still. His breath, his heart, his pulse against Will's mouth and the exposed points of his teeth. Will inhales gently through his nose. Nuzzles. Kisses again and again, slow and soft presses of lips. It is eroticism and fealty both—succulent want and ruinous need.

"I'd be so lost without you," Will murmurs. "Thanks."

Hannibal licks his lips. Blinks in the morning light at this bright and exquisite young thing who depends on him so thoroughly, and who Hannibal is surely halfway to loving. He slowly frees his hand, cups Will's jaw, and revels in the look of unmoored worship he is given in return, blown pupils

and a glossy mouth. Does Will know how intoxicating he is? How unique, how desirous? Judging by that glint of fear and sadness that remains even now, Hannibal has to assume he doesn't.

"Mylimasis," he murmurs, and the word tastes different on his tongue. Sweet, savory, strange. New. "I think the Chesapeake Ripper should be absolutely terrified of you, and all that you are capable of."

Will blinks, slow flutters of inky lashes, and levels Hannibal with an uncomprehending stare and steadily reddening cheeks that flare with heat against his palm. As he withdraws, Hannibal trails his fingertips over Will's cheekbones, his lips, and fights a current of possessive, terrible want that would gladly push Will into the worn back seat and climb atop him, rip him from his fine clothing until their sole source of heat is one another.

"Go on then," he says as his hand falls away, and his voice is like gravel, grating against his throat and his aching teeth. "Chase your killer, Will. I'll be waiting."

Will is silent. No *I'll call you* or *see you later* because there is simply nothing to be said. His hands shake as he puts the car into reverse and carefully backs out of the driveway, but in the moments before he starts down the road, he looks back.

Will looks back, and finds Hannibal there, and nods his silent understanding, and then he is gone.

Hannibal's hands twitch at his sides. The room of his memory palace that he's dedicated to Will is spilling outward, over the threshold and into the halls, filling an entire wing (and indeed, the master bedroom) with his influence. Not only the light places, but also the dark.

It's only the knowledge that this meeting is unavoidable that keeps him pinned in place. Afterward, he will have days to plan his next move. Perhaps gentle isn't the best way; what Will needs is a statement. A declaration of his intent. Hannibal will be glad to give it to him—but when the moment comes, and not a second sooner.

Hannibal can be patient.

He gathers his coffee cup and climbs into the Bentley, hears it rumble and purr to life beneath his hands. The threads of fate and circumstance are reaching outward, and Hannibal senses a storm on the horizon. He's uncertain of its origins, only that he must be wary of it—and warier still of the black SUV with tinted windows and a government plate parked in front of the hospital entrance.

Chapter End Notes

reblog to save a life or an author's sanity

The earrings Hannibal bought for Will. ~~most of that website won't even list prices. the highest tag i saw was $130,000, so oh my god, how much worse could it get for there to be a "price available~~

upon request" kjsdhfkdhsf makes me think of that old adage "if you have to ask you can't afford it"

2:6

Chapter Notes

me, banging pots and together: HEY COME ON PEOPLE LOOK ALIVE LET'S GO IT'S WAY PAST TIME FOR THE PLOT TO START OK TRUST ME

please check out this absolutely lovely fanart of Will from the last chapter by @tahenkeai. thank you so, so much!! <3 <3 seriously, made my whole week!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

What Hannibal finds, when he enters, is akin to an impromptu staff meeting—albeit what seems like an involuntary one.

He catches sight of multiple pairs of scrubs disappearing into the break room, and the crowded presence of bodies lingering near the doorway. Though Hannibal thinks he would prefer to keep himself divorced from whatever situation is developing, an informed mind is one better prepared to deal with consequences. He sees the commotion, and he follows.

Harried nurses stay as close to the threshold as they can stand, visibly irritated at being interrupted. While doctors being rounded up would be an almost unnoticed occurrence, the nurses are the foundation of the emergency department. Without their influence, nothing can last for long, and they must be available for any emergency situation.

It makes Hannibal wonder what, exactly, has happened to have them corralled into a small, private room like this, out of the way of patients' listening ears.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I will keep this quick as I am able," says an African-American man who makes himself the center of the room—tall, strong features, a charismatic, commanding presence and a booming voice. He wears a visitor's badge, and in his hand is a set of credentials in a leather case, declaring him an agent of the FBI. He is flanked by the department administrator, a mousy man who looks almost laughably unauthoritative at the agent's side.

Well. This will be interesting.

"I understand you're all anxious to get back to your responsibilities. So am I. I'll tell you what I know and you tell me what you know, and we'll all get back to work and have a decent day. Sound good to you?"

Murmurs of assent. At least the agent knows better than to waste their time; Hannibal leans against the break room doorway in the throng of his colleagues, and has the passing thought that perhaps it's surprisingly fortunate he *is* here. Attendance and compliance are often bedfellows—smoothing over whatever this is about will help cement his already exemplary reputation.

"My name is Agent Jack Crawford, I'm a part of the Behavioral Analysis Unit under SSA Kade Prurnell. I was sent here to talk to you today because of a security breach that we have now traced

back to your hospital." Flickers of discontent—no one likes being accused, and the agent is skirting dangerously close to that line.

Crawford, Crawford. Hannibal knows that name somehow.

"A scan of *this report—* " He holds up a printed copy of a medical document, the text much too fine for anyone to read from afar. And yet, in that moment, Hannibal knows exactly why he has come, and his lips press into a thin line. "—ended up on *Tattlecrime dot com…"*

Strange realization—followed by satisfaction. Oh, his Will is such a clever thing. No scans, no proof of wrongdoing.

"…among others."

Of course the FBI is aware of Will's site, given its viral nature and in-depth insights. It's only natural, though at this point, Freddie's is likely one of many who boast scans of the autopsy report, if only because so many ripped the file from her site and uploaded it to their own. She, of course, will remain the originator of such data on an official basis. Will only paraphrased the information within the report, which is no proof at all that he stole it.

Hannibal can't help but be proud.

He glances into the room, at his coworkers and colleagues and catches sight of Abel Gideon across the break area. The man offers a nod at first, subtle and polite—and then a decidedly impolite roll of his eyes at Crawford's expense. Hannibal does not smile, but his frown fades. Gideon's eyes glint with satisfaction at the subtle camaraderie. Around them, others look much more affected by the news; deep frowns, shaking heads of disapproval, genuine perplexment. Who would dare to risk their careers at such a prestigious hospital over… over what?

Of course, Hannibal knows.

"And for those of you wondering *exactly* what the hell I'm going on about, this is the autopsy report of a recent murder victim who was released to your hospital—victim of a killer currently identified as the Chesapeake Ripper, who was responsible for the deaths of 19 people in the Beltway accident earlier this week, the injury of 73 others, and is so far attributed to the deaths of 11 more individual murder victims on top of that. You can see my reason for concern."

Unsettled whispers. Coworkers suddenly doubting coworkers, and simultaneously believing the best of their friends. Forming silent allegiances without more than a glance at those they know, connecting eyes across a room. Human loyalty at work, with Hannibal its silent witness and participant, its secret subject.

Crawford eyes the crowd. Sharp, observative, a prime hunter in his own right.

"I know no one wants to get anyone in trouble," Crawford adds. "But whatever you've seen, we need to know. An information leak in an open investigation can lead to a lot of problems, or a lot of dead civilians. A tabloid website publishing private medical records threatens the credibility of this institution, and all of your jobs. Now I don't want to push the old 'if you see something, say something' line, but that's what it's come to. I need to know of anything suspicious or out of the ordinary you've seen in regards to personnel and patients. I'll be meeting with other shifts as they come available to collect information, so *please*," Crawford stares them down, and it is clear he is not asking, "reach out to me while I'm here. We get this taken care of, I can get back to my job, you can get back to yours.

It's a dismissal, clear as anything. Crawford waits until the first of the nurses hustles to brush past Hannibal and get back to her work before he stills the room again.

"And doctors, nurses, staff—best come to me before I come to you. Whatever you know, I *will* find out. No one likes a wild card in a murder investigation, especially the FBI."

This time, they wait. Jack Crawford very nearly smiles, and Hannibal commends the man for his control, his poise, his maneuvering. It's skillful work, and speaks to an intelligent mind and keen social awareness.

"That's all," Crawford says pleasantly. "You're dismissed."

Hannibal doesn't dare to dream the man will let them go so easily. No, he'll be doing his own interviews, seeking out his own intel, and hunting the source of the information leak. Something tells him that Crawford is skilled at tracking, and a much more stealthy pursuer than his booming voice and charismatic presence would lead one to believe.

Crawford looks up and catches Hannibal's eye in the doorway—the crinkle of a frown, of seeing Hannibal as a new arrival, and unsure of his welcome. Surely just the manner of his dress will make him memorable, out of place in a fine three-piece suit among exhausted surgeons and nurses in their well-worn scrubs. The agent turns to the administrator, who must make mention of Hannibal's name, because Crawford's visible suspicion is smoothed.

Hannibal stands aside for his colleagues to filter out, and receives a smirk from Gideon as he passes. "Hell of a world, Lecter. Not even sure if we can trust our own patients."

There is an undercurrent of irony in those words—Hannibal suppresses a frown, keeps his expression open and smooth, and quirks a brow in return. "At least we may still be sure of ourselves."

Gideon's smirk breaks into a grin. "That we may." He inclines his head in an exaggerated but genteel gesture, not quite a bow, and Hannibal is given more the sense of attempted camaraderie than mockery. "Doctor."

Hannibal nods, and allows an answering smile to pull at the edge of his lips. "Doctor."

Gideon heads back to his shift, seamlessly integrating himself with the nurses, who smile and laugh as he shakes them from their solemn consideration. Gideon is known for his indiscriminate flirting, though to his credit, Hannibal has never seen him cross the line from playful banter into making anyone uncomfortable. They are not so different, in their own ways: Gideon is a force of raw personality and presence, and Hannibal is a pillar of comfort, authority, and sensibility.

And to protect his sensibilities, cautious approaches must be made.

He waits until the last of the nurses have passed to enter, mindful that he has only a little time before he's due several buildings over in the psychiatric department. The administrator notices Hannibal right away..

"Mr. Merle," Hannibal says with a pleasant smile, and holds out his hand to shake.

"Doctor Lecter, very good to see you!" Merle's palm is slightly damp with stress. Hannibal does not wipe his hand on his suit when their shake is done, but it's a near thing. The man nods at Lecter's suit and woolen overcoat with a smile and poorly-concealed envy in his eyes."You must be off today."

“Meeting with Doctor Chilton momentarily,” Hannibal replies. Jack Crawford’s eyes are steady on Hannibal, and he nods, holds out his hand. Crawford’s palm is broad and strong, though he has no need of hand-squeezing intimidation tactics that other men in his position might employ. His shake is firm and professional, his eye contact steady. Yes, Crawford will indeed be going places, Hannibal thinks as he draws back to a sensible distance. “Agent Crawford, was it?”

“Yes, that’s right. I saw you arrive right as we were about to start.” Jack’s brows raise in polite query. “Couldn’t stay away from the commotion, huh?”

Hannibal’s lips part to expose the points of his teeth. Ah, so it begins. “Well, I do work in the emergency department,” he says in good-natured self-deprecation. “At least for the moment.”

“Oh, I heard,” Merle says mournfully, and pins Hannibal with a conflicted smile. Happy for his progression, but sad to see him go. Crawford inclines his head in interest. “You’re sure we can’t convince you to stay on?”

Hannibal chuckles. “Afraid not. I’m due for a change. I think the hours in psychiatry will be more forgiving to my hobbies and my personal life.”

That draws a rueful smile from Jack. “My wife’s no fan of my schedule, either.”

Hannibal blinks—Crawford, *ah,* perhaps that’s why the name is familiar. The mental image of a beautiful woman in an elegant dress comes to him, mingling among socialites with a wine glass. “No relation to Phyllis Crawford?” Hannibal asks.

Jack looks pleasantly surprised. “My wife. You know Bella?”

Common ground and shared acquaintances breed trust. The happenstance is fortunate. “I’ve met her briefly at the Baltimore Symphony once or twice. She’s a representative in Washington for NATO, is she not?” At Jack’s nod, Hannibal smiles with satisfaction. “When she mentioned her husband also worked for the government and was away on business, I’ll admit I didn’t think of something so exciting.”

Jack laughs, full-bellied and good-natured. “I think I was in Milwaukee for the last performance. It’s not usually my kind of scene. I’m a simple guy with simple tastes. I think the charity gala will be enough excitement for the whole year.”

Hannibal’s smile widens. “Perhaps we will see each other there, Agent Crawford.”

He nods. “Call me Jack.”

Hannibal nods in reply. “Hannibal, then.” Jack’s brows lift slightly, but his smile doesn’t waver, and Hannibal adds, “Actually, I was wondering if I might speak to you for a moment about an incident that occurred yesterday.”

“Of course. Mr. Merle, please excuse us,” Crawford says.

“Oh, not at all,” Merle says. “I should be getting back to work. Agent, if you have any questions, please let us know.”

“Will do, Mr. Merle, thank you.” The man excuses himself and leaves Hannibal and Crawford more or less alone, only a few stragglers left in the break room attending to their lunches or hurried snacks.

Hannibal rubs his hands together before him in the approximation of warming them, though he is unbothered by the residual chill. Appearing relatable is his most powerful weapon. “I wasn’t aware you’d be coming, otherwise I would have arrived earlier,” Hannibal says, almost an apology. “I’m afraid I only have a few moments, but I heard you mention the website Tattlecrime. I’ve come across the site before.”

Jack nearly growls. “A particular nuisance. Doesn’t seem to matter how many times we tell journalists to let us investigate and that their stirring makes things worse, they just keep at it.”

Hannibal nods in silent sympathy, but without voicing outright agreement. “Because I’m aware of the site, I recognized the name of a young woman who introduced herself to me yesterday as Freddie Lounds. She was trespassing in the lower levels after sneaking out of the emergency room, which she entered under false pretenses.”

Jack’s brows shoot up. His expression is thunderous, but his voice is grim and controlled. “Freddie Lounds was here?”

Hannibal nods again with a frown. “She’s younger than I expected. Red hair, delicate features. Her address listed an apartment in Maryland. I don’t remember it precisely.” Hannibal slowly grimaces, apologetic. “And the staff won’t be able to release private patient documents without a warrant, but it was logged by the security officers with her name, and she’s since been blacklisted.”

Jack nods in reply. “What did she ask you for?”

Hannibal chooses his words carefully. “She mentioned the incident at the Beltway. When I was disinclined to give her what she wanted, she turned to insults and accusations against my character, and my partner’s.” He frowns, deeper this time, and sees Jack take careful notice of the word *partner*. “I’ve been seeing someone from the University of Maryland who I met through the department. I’ve visited him on campus before to get lunch together.” Hannibal’s frown grows darker, as though just realizing. “She must be a student there, and saw me and followed me.”

“Stalking,” Jack says with a tight shake of his head, a grimace on his face and an irritation directed elsewhere. Hannibal knows he has won Crawford’s allegiance, his sympathy. “And theft of information.”

“She wasn’t able to get anything from me,” Hannibal says with a firm nod, determined. “But who knows who else she’s lied to and manipulated, or how many times she’s used a ruse to gain entry. I hope that reporting the incident will prevent it from happening again, but I worry she may try the same at other institutions.”

Crawford nods; reaches out, and lays his hand upon Hannibal’s shoulder. “Doctor, thank you for stepping forward. This information could go a long way.”

“Happy to help.” Hannibal smiles, inclines his head.

“One more question, before you go.”

Hannibal’s smile freezes in place, polite and unmoving. “Of course.”

Jack’s hand falls away. He glances around the room, then leans slightly forward. A pinch forms between his heavy brows, lines around his eyes that are already starting to wrinkle, despite his similar age. This is a man who carries stress with him always. If he’s not careful, it will mark him for life.

Jack pitches his voice quietly, and looks much more troubled. “Lounds wasn’t the first one to publish this information.”

Hannibal lifts his brows and settles Jack with a look of alarm. “*Really,* ” he replies.

Jack shakes his head in mute frustration, and for just a moment, his eyes close. Hannibal sees the weight of emotional strain on Jack Crawford’s shoulders, intelligence and frustration constrained by the legal process, and not the ability to run free and shake answers free of anyone he meets. It’s the curse of a curious mind put within such heavy regimentation. Hannibal himself would go mad without the outlet to express himself as he desires. If only Jack knew precisely who he stood beside, with bent heads and conspiratory whispers.

“About fifteen minutes before Lounds posted her article about the killer’s tenth official victim, the first in this new cycle, another blog posted one of their own. All the same information from the report, but we can’t confirm whether someone *told* them about it, or whether they were able to get possession of it.” Crawford glances at Hannibal, lips pressed together in a thin line. “Tattlecrime was the loudest, at first. Lounds has a loyal reader base that lives for the drama and sensationalism. But this other site is a concern to the Bureau—the conclusions the author has drawn, and how closely and specifically they’ve followed these killings. Toss in the anonymity and the lengths with which they’re going to cover their tracks, and the sudden attention and sensationalism their article drew…” He pauses, looks at Hannibal meaningfully. “And then the escalation, and subsequent denial and *defense* of that escalation.”

Crawford says nothing more.

The realization, when it hits Hannibal, is almost absurd. “You believe the author of the site *is* the Chesapeake Ripper?”

“Or associated with him,” Jack agrees. “That’s my personal belief. Not the belief of the Bureau, or they’d be going much harder to the paint chasing this person down than they actually are. Have you seen anything else suspicious in recent weeks—anyone here who stuck out to you, who was asking questions they shouldn’t, who didn’t belong?”

Yes, Crawford is a skilled hunter indeed, with a strong intuition, if a misguided one. He would make a useful ally and a dangerous foe. Hannibal will have to tread lightly. He frowns, allowing himself to be lost in the markers of deep thought. Touches his face, allows his eyes to wander, and slowly shakes his head. “No, I’m afraid not. Even the event with Freddie Lounds was an outlier. Though the number of patients and passerby I interact with as a surgeon is significantly less than the nurses. They may have more answers than I do.”

Crawford sighs, clearly disappointed but unsurprised. “I’ll touch base with them.” He claps his hand on Hannibal’s shoulder. “Thank you for your help, Doctor. I’m fortunate you were here.”

Hannibal smiles. He shows his teeth. Yes, how fortunate he was here, indeed. “All too happy to help.” Hannibal makes to retreat, and pauses. “Jack?” Agent Crawford twitches, looks to him. “I’ll look forward to seeing you at the charity gala next week. In the meantime, I wish you all the best in your search, and if you have any questions, you may reach out to me at any time.”

Jack’s shoulders relax. His replying smile is small, but genuine. “Thank you, Hannibal. Enjoy your meeting.”

Hannibal chuckles at the thought of anyone *enjoying* a meeting with Frederick Chilton. “I’ll certainly try my best.”

Hannibal finds precisely what he expects when he enters the Department of Psychiatry, complete with Chilton chattering at Bedelia's young intern Alana Bloom while she maintains an air of polite attentiveness over thinly-veiled suffering. Hannibal bites back a smirk as he approaches and sees the wave of her relief.

"Doctor Lecter," Alana says with a smile before Frederick can cut in, and holds out her hand to shake. "Good to see you again."

Hannibal shakes her hand firmly and inclines his head. She seems a smart young thing, and certainly must be in order to keep up with Doctor Du Maurier's demands of an assistant, and high expectations of an intern bearing her approval. "Miss Bloom, likewise. Though I expect I'll be calling you Doctor sooner than later."

Her cheeks pinken; her smile brightens. "I sure hope so."

Frederick rolls his shoulders back, lifts his head. "Wonderful of you to join us, Doctor Lecter."

His tone is pleasant, but Hannibal knows his intent is anything but. Hannibal's eyes slip to Frederick as Alana winces. Slowly, as to not quite appear rude, Hannibal puts his hands into his pockets. "My apologies for running behind. There was an impromptu staff meeting downstairs with an FBI agent regarding the recent data breach. I came as soon as I was able."

Frederick perks up at that. "Oh. Interesting. Well, the FBI does love a good manhunt."

"That they do." Hannibal inclines his head. "Shall we begin?"

Frederick flusters; he's younger than Hannibal by a year or two, but full of himself and his position of authority. He's precisely where Hannibal would be if he had chosen psychiatry for his initial residency —but Hannibal doesn't regret his choice in the least. He has a fulfilling career and a stellar reputation, the respect and admiration of administrators for his accomplishments. Switching to psychiatry is simply chasing the labor of love, and embraces his desire for a new challenge. There is nothing more challenging and fascinating than the human mind, and all its twisted intricacies.

Frederick's grimace is gratifying. Oh, he so badly wants to be in control, to have others subjugated to his whims—but most importantly, to be admired. Frederick craves the validation that comes from others recognizing his work. It's a simple need, and a classic one, and one that Hannibal shares. It's how they go *about* that need that differs.

"Yes, yes, let's begin."

Frederick details responsibilities of residents—overseeing group and cognitive behavioral therapy, working alongside the fellows in charge of patient medication. Individual therapy with select patients, monitoring their progress, both good and bad. Johns Hopkins' outpatient facility is on another campus altogether, as it bears the majority of their program—the inpatient program is mostly for extended cases of anxiety and depression, eating disorders, and patients at risk of self-harm that require supervision. There are exceptions, naturally: some with schizophrenia and paranoia, borderline personality disorder, dissociation.

“The hospital here primarily caters to serious cases,” Chilton says cheerfully. “Rather than the more conventional *worried well*, as they’re called.” He glances over his shoulder, and at seeing Hannibal’s impassive expression and Alana’s glance toward him and back again, he huffs, “You know, the middle class folk who hate their jobs and their spouses, who are scared of the ocean despite agreeing to go on vacation to the Caribbean.”

“Though some patients present more severe symptoms, all are equally worthy of treatment,” Hannibal replies with a faint frown, and is heartily echoed by Alana’s nod. “These so-called *worried well* are the mothers and fathers and siblings and cousins of those who are egregiously *un*well, and may improve their care and station with the right support. New studies show even socially-accepted levels of stress over an extended time can lead to cardiovascular disease and heart attack.”

Chilton grimaces. “Of course. And for those who are more suited to outpatient treatment, we have the Bayview campus with family counseling and the like. Here, we focus on unconventional therapies and research. Electroconvulsive therapy, light therapy, transcranial magnetic stimulation. You name it, we’ll give it a go.”

Alana’s brow crinkles. She crosses her arms over her chest and trots to keep up with Chilton’s inconsiderately quick pace, her heels clicking against the floor—pretty but sensible shoes, and her brightly-colored and boldly-patterned dress swishes around her legs. Her expression of femininity is vibrant and unapologetic, suited to her personality. “Those can be dangerous,” she says.

Chilton shrugs. “We make sure to get consent, and they’re informed of the risks. Most of them want to get better.”

His flippancy is irritating. Hannibal’s brows lift slightly, and he glances into one of the ECT labs with equal parts interest and distaste. “So long as one doesn’t promise results they can’t deliver. That would be unethical.”

Chilton bristles. “Ethics and patient safety are of the utmost importance to this department and myself. That’s why any procedures that carry the risk of medical complications are performed here on-site, and we have two certified nurse practitioners on the floor at any given time, as well as a host of RNs and LPNs.” He stops, turns, stares at them with challenge in his eyes. “Interest in the unusual is the reason we’ve all found this profession. The unconventional can sometimes make huge strides in patient recovery, and those discoveries are being made all the time. One must be willing to push the envelope of polite practice, within reason, to broaden the possibilities of psychiatric science.”

“Within reason,” Alana replies before Hannibal can say it himself, and yes, he does now see why Bedelia likes this girl. He sees the same fire of spirit in her that he sees in Will, that same spark of intelligence—but where Will chases darkness, Alana Bloom chases the light of her own faith in the good of the world.

It’s brave of her. Naive, but brave.

“But we can’t risk the wellbeing and ultimately the recovery of patients in the name of making those strides. Not without full disclosure and their complete and informed consent.” She taps her toe impatiently, and pins Chilton with a look that would shatter lesser men. She must have siblings, Hannibal decides. Perhaps the oldest of them, used to wrangling unruly children and maintaining the order her parents set in place. “Our first priority is to them and their health.”

“Our first priority,” Chilton replies, lips curled into a tight smile and eyes blazing, and Hannibal can smell the beginnings of anxious sweat, “is to curing them. Their health will follow.”

If this is how the next four years will go, Hannibal can already anticipate one of them either transferring or resigning out of sheer frustration. He decides to change the subject, lest they be reduced to blows. “Do residents spend more time at this facility, or at Bayview?”

Chilton seems glad for the distraction. Alana, too, for a reason to draw focus back to their tour. “Depends on specialization. Family and child psychology, yes. Abnormal psychology usually stays here, or treatment focused on addiction recovery or eating disorders. For the first year, residents choose a mentor and float between the facilities, pick up shifts on the clinical cycle. Years three and four pin down specialty, and decision on fellowship or transfer, or for some, private practice.”

Chilton grimaces slightly at that, like such an idea is boring and distasteful. Hannibal supposes he prefers the dramatics of being in a more centralized setting, with its thrills and the power it provides over junior staff and patients alike.

He thinks he would prefer private practice, truly. Hand-choosing his clientele, setting his own appointment schedule, doing private research from the comfort of his own home, rather than clinical studies. Time in the evenings to cook and entertain, or to travel when he so desires. The freedom and ability to roam as he would like to roam, kill as he would like to kill. For a solitary life, that sounds like something akin to quiet peace. And with the growing potential of having an equal and companion…

It is a thought that borders on domestic.

Life with Will, in an ideal world and an idyllic set of circumstances. Art, culture, travel, food. The lushness of their senses, of desire and freedom. What would that be like?

Hannibal follows as Chilton herds them around, past the nurse’s station in the center of the ward and back toward the entryway. Alana asks more questions than he does—she seems willing to grit her teeth and deal with Chilton’s fundamentally opposite and selfish personality, so long as she gets the answers she seeks. But Hannibal can see the fury building within her when Chilton defers to Hannibal, both as her senior as a doctor, and as his fellow man. He is wrong to do so, and Hannibal makes his best attempts to include her, but the pull of a sympathetic potential colleague is far outweighed by the potential of an insufferable boss.

By the end of the tour, Alana has surpassed frustration and come full circle back to calm. “Thank you for your insight, Doctor Chilton,” she says, each word precisely placed between her tongue and teeth. “And for the tour. Have a nice day.”

Chilton, oblivious, says, “Of course, Miss Bloom. I hope we’ll see you as part of the program next Fall.”

Alana inclines her head; says nothing. She shares a long and level look with Hannibal before she excuses herself. The nurses buzz her out of the ward, and the click of her heels disappears behind the heavy thud of a leaden door, a barricade between those inside and the outside world.

Hannibal wisely decides not to inform Frederick that he’s just lost himself a resident. He has more pressing matters to attend to, and he can discuss Miss Bloom’s placement later with Bedelia. “Have you had many other prospectives this year?”

“More this year than last year,” Chilton says, preening at being asked questions that defer to his experience and authority. The man really is so simple. He gestures for Hannibal to follow, and Hannibal does—away from the ward entrance, toward what is presumably Chilton’s office. “Bigger

graduating class, but we've had some travel from the tri-state area. Of course, our program is selective."

"Of course," Hannibal agrees. Emergency medicine and the surgery track is just as careful in choosing new residents, if not more so. There is significantly more room for error when one wields a scalpel over a pen. "How do you find the department?"

"Overall, interesting. The research institution is much more open to, shall we say, unconventional modes of therapy. It's a fine line, as Miss Bloom said—" Derision, clearly heard but not spoken, "—but I've found the results to be positive."

"What do you specialize in?"

"Currently? Abnormal psychology and our more violent patients." Chilton opens a door and stands aside for Hannibal to enter; it's a similar sized office to his own, though one decorated with framed covers of published psychiatric journals, gilded and matted self-congratulation. "I hope to eventually end up in the criminal sector. The fringes of society are fascinating to me. They display the most base of all our instincts."

Chilton rounds his desk and sinks into his seat, high-backed and opulent, well above the hospital's allowance. It is a throne rather than a desk chair. Hannibal removes his overcoat and folds it over the back of the standard-issue seat across from him, and unbuttons his suit jacket as he sits. No use in wrinkling it.

"Just look at the Beltway killer, the one they're all calling the Chesapeake Ripper based on an online blog. There are *serious* psychological things to be unpacked there." Chilton laughs to himself, incredulous as he rubs a hand over his mouth. "When they catch him, it won't be because of an anonymous hack's assessment, it'll be because of doctors and law enforcement doing their jobs with integrity and experience."

Hannibal slowly raises his brows. Sits back in the seat. Wonders what Chilton would say if he knew that the supposed *anonymous hack* was the very prospective student he'd salivated after and lost, as he's just lost Alana Bloom. Will's potential remains unchanged, regardless of Chilton's influence on his life. Hannibal hopes to see him flourish under a more attentive hand.

"Sometimes new ideas can have merit," Hannibal replies, and blinks slowly at Chilton's flicker of irritation and concession in quick succession. "Have you read the blog?"

Chilton's lips purse. "No."

"I found it illuminating. The author's insights were not so obtuse as one might assume from an unverified website. They may even be a psychologist from our community—we simply have no way of knowing." Hannibal touches his mouth thoughtfully, then lowers his hands to his knees. "You must've had a number of interesting patients over the years, seen violent offenders come and go. Do you think any of them are capable of that sort of display?"

"My patients?" Chilton scoffs. "No. No, they've all been fairly straightforward." He reclines in his chair, posture deplorable. Laces his hands together before him, and touches the pads of his index fingers together. "Although…"

Hannibal tips his head forward in a sign of intrigue; Chilton catches his eyes, and a somewhat unpleasant grin spreads across his face. "I can't name names, of course. But a few years ago I had a promising potential student that gave me some *very* interesting signals. It's my belief they never

sought professional psychiatric care." He tips his head back against his chair and sighs to the ceiling. "What a shame it was to let them leave."

He has an idea that he knows *exactly* who Frederick is talking about. And so long as no names are mentioned, he is technically not violating Will's request to speak about him. Needlessly, he asks, "Intelligent?"

"Oh, intelligent, charismatic, remorseless, the whole trifecta," Chilton sighs explosively. He looks like a child who has had a favored toy snatched away, but old enough not to cry about it—rather to stew in begrudgement and dissatisfaction, and scheme to get it back. "Seamlessly blended in among their peers. I thought among the youngest. I didn't even notice h—*they* were what they were until, like Miss Bloom, they started asking me questions about the program." He scowls. "About things well beyond the undergraduate level, if you ask me, even seeking entry to a Master's program."

Hannibal blinks. A Master's program? Will would have been barely eighteen, if even that.

"I still believe they may be some sort of savant, though my searches for their name afterward came up empty. That's *more* suspicious, if you ask me." Chilton harrumphs, sits up straight with a disgruntled expression. "And of course, there were the solo interviews. I've never in my years seen a person look like that when they said they wanted to go into behavioral neuroscience and criminal profiling. *Smiling* at the mention of a murderer—it was downright unsettling. At first I feared they were romanticizing the work, fancied themselves a monster catcher, and were going to be in for a rude awakening when they went up against a man we weren't even sure existed yet. And do you know what they said?"

Chilton stares. Hannibal arches a brow, mind racing, and Chilton takes it for permission.

"They said, *I don't appreciate the way you're talking to us, Doctor Chilton.*" Chilton's eyes light with intrigue and frustration at once, and he rubs his palms across the smooth surface of his desk. "*Us.* And then they got this look, like they knew *exactly* what they said, and got up and excused themselves from the interview, and never replied to their acceptance to the program."

Us. Yes, it's undoubtedly Will, based on what he's told Hannibal about the concept of *timesharing with himself*. A slip of the tongue; perhaps even a glimpse into the other so-called self that lives within the cage of Will's mind. Oh, how Hannibal would love to set it free.

"It sounds like an illuminating experience," Hannibal says, for what else can he say? Like any other conversation with Will, he's sure it was full of more subtext than one could fully grasp, especially for a stranger unfamiliar with his quirks. Even Hannibal himself knows comparatively little, and every secret Will reveals about his past has taken unrelenting work to unearth.

Chilton leans back in the chair. Frowns again. "I believe they might be capable of something. What, exactly, it's not yet clear. And they're far too young to be this so-called Ripper, but what they may become in the future—well." He huffs a bitter laugh through his nose. "Needless to say, I'm quite certain I'll be profiling them after they've given themselves reason to be arrested. It's only a matter of time."

"Not all with the propensity for violence become offenders," Hannibal says with an echoing frown of his own, some slight downward tilt of lips; he does not like the way Chilton speaks of Will, while simultaneously delighting in the prospect. "Some become healers, or dedicate themselves to the hunt in the name of the law."

“Not this one,” Chilton says with a shake of his head. His eyes are distant. “No, not this one. Call me superstitious, Doctor Lecter, but there was something inside him, and not even time will put that fire out.”

Chilton is so lost in his mind, he doesn’t seem to notice his slip. He’s a fool, yes. But he is also a psychiatrist, and despite his flawed opinions, whatever it is he saw in Will when he was young and raw, broken open by the recent death of his father—Hannibal wants to know what it is. He leans forward, and his intrigue is very real. “I hope you kept notes,” he says. “Should they ever need to become evidence, such information could be invaluable insight to the developmental psychology of such a person.”

Frederick puffs up with pride. “Of course. I keep all my notes for prospectives just in case they should ever reapply or ask for references.” There’s a glint in Chilton’s eye that says the obvious—that he’s never considered the value of such notes before. Their intrinsic worth, should Will ever become what Frederick believes of him; should he hatch from the chrysalis of his sensibilities, and become a killer to rival the beauty and brutality of God.

“If your instincts are so strong about this individual, Frederick,” Hannibal says slowly, “then trust them, but be cautious.”

One lightbulb above Frederick’s desk flickers, casting them in a fluttering strobe of fluorescence that enhances the shadows on the walls, the hollows of their eyes. Hannibal sits up straight on the edge of his seat, and when Frederick looks at him, there is a flash of something unsettled.

Perhaps it’s what he felt when he looked at Will.

“Why’s that?” Chilton asks.

Hannibal will have his answers, and those notes. He will know the truth of Will, and all that Frederick Chilton has seen. In time, he’ll peel away each layer of his darling’s defenses, strip him of each layer of his fortresses down to bare skin and bone.

“If their ultimate destiny is decided, but the path and its circumstances remains unclear,” Hannibal says carefully, “one would not want to be the inciting incident to this individual’s madness, lest the instigator be caught in the crossfire.”

Chilton stares at him, uncomprehending. The light sputters and dims, and despite their perfect safety within the shelter of this enclosed office, Chilton freezes like prey. Hannibal, too, is still—but like a predator waiting to strike.

“Men are animals like any other. I’ve seen it many times in the emergency department, on the less savory side of medical science. Being born is a taxing process. It’s the most difficult thing a creature will ever endure.” Hannibal inclines his head, and slowly smiles at the constriction of Chilton’s pupils. If he’s scared, he should be. Any self-respecting animal knows when they’re being watched, even if they’re not sure by who or what.

Somewhere deep in the dark, Hannibal’s beloved is howling, wailing, waiting.

He has no intention of leaving Will alone there for long.

“The youngest among us are the hungriest, Frederick. And their screaming will never stop until they’re fed.”

Chapter End Notes

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2:7

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the fact that this is getting posted a little later in the afternoon than I'd prefer. I got really sick last night and was interrupted from my normal writing crunch, which sucked, but it's all good now. I'll be replying to comments on the last chapter shortly. Thank you for helping Headlines break 8k hits. You're all fantastic and you make me so, so happy. The response I've gotten to this fic is super encouraging and keeps me going. <3

ALSO, HEY HEY: check out this AMAZING B&W commission by @iruutciv of Chapter 15 (where it is now embedded). There's another one yet to come, which I'll be sure to share as soon as it's done, and I'm VERY excited.

ALSO: please be aware that there's some description of some past Ripper victims in this chapter. I think the "graphic description of corpses" about covers this aspect, but fair warning.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Class drags on. Will is fortunate to only have two today, followed by filming in the late afternoon. It goes slowly; the lights are bright and hot, and though the news outside campus is rife with substance, the news *on* campus is beyond boring. Student unions, petitions, plans for next semester. Arguments over clubs, sporting events. It's all lacklustre, and though the student journalists of Merrill tend to be extraordinary, their stage presence does sometimes leave something to be desired.

It's in the midst of heavy cameras and sweating under spotlights that Will steps off of the news bubble's stage, hiding where it's cool until he's needed again. There shouldn't be much left, thankfully—once all the bits are filmed, it's just a matter of creating a reel and piecing it together for the school's own TV network, the weekly segment awaiting completion and upload.

Then Will feels a tug at the back of his sweater and nearly jumps out of his skin.

He breathes a sigh of relief when he notices Peter, head ducked to avoid Will's eyes, though no less insistent. Peter is easily one of Will's favorite people on campus. He's simple and kind, no hidden motivations. He loves animals, though he now suffers a mobility issue after being kicked in the head by one of the horses in the equestrian club. He'd been too soft-hearted to sue the school for damages, and at the age of nineteen, his parents couldn't force him to do so. But he remains a gentle heart, a kindred soul. He always smiles at stories about Winston, and that alone is reason enough for Will to like him.

"D-didn't mean to scare ya," Peter mumbles.

"Oh, no, that's okay," Will breathes, and places a hand on his chest to steady his heart. He'll be the first to admit that he's jumpy, what with the recent developments involving the Ripper. "I've been twitchy lately. How are you?"

“Good, good.” Peter doesn’t look at him when he speaks, but Will doesn’t take it personally; he knows it’s part of the manifestation of his disorder, and Will has never been hugely fond of eye-contact anyway. The only person he’s comfortable with knowing that much of him is Hannibal, and only because he doesn’t question what he sees there. “Will, uh, you gotta go.”

Will blinks. “What?”

“You gotta go, Will, you gotta…” Petter shuffles in place. “Saw Freddie with a big guy, older. Was carryin’ a badge.”

Badge? Will’s brow creases with a frown. But when it occurs to him what that might mean, he curses under his breath. “Cops?”

“Feds. Um.” Peter shakes his head quietly, tugs the sleeve of Will’s sweater between index finger and thumb, just once. “They were talkin’ about privacy. Her site.”

“Damn it,” Will mutters. “Where? When?”

“Not far, not long,” Peter replies. His shoulders hunch and tense under Will’s laser focus. “She s-said your name. Heard her when I walked by.” He swallows. Nods once, an aborted motion that is not carried all the way through with the force of Peter’s nerves. “Y-you should go.”

Will’s mind springs into action, but he reaches out slowly, and places his hands on Peter’s shoulders. He doesn’t force eye contact, but gently squeezes as a show of thanks and solidarity. “Thank you, Peter. You’re a really great friend.”

Peter trembles under his touch, unused to such a thing, but Will can tell he’s pleased. “S’ok,” he mutters. “I can finish the reel, get it done. If they come lookin’ I won’t say anythin’.”

“Thank you,” Will says quietly. Squeezes once more, and then lets go. Grabs Hannibal’s coat and shrugs it on with haste, puts his bag over his shoulder, and ducks out. The filming crew can survive without him. What Will *can’t* survive is standing around like an idiot for the FBI to pull him out of class like a disobedient child, instead of safely *somewhere not here* that they’ll have to work to find him.

Will knew they would catch up to Freddie, with the scans she posted. Showing your hand and uploading exactly what you have, while also publicizing your identity, is a straight-shot to a charge for impeding an investigation or violating privacy records. It didn’t take a genius to figure that out—but as far as Will knows, Freddie’s never gotten busted before. Maybe it’s a simple case of ignorance, or sheer overconfidence.

But Will knows the things forensics are capable of, both physical and digital.

As he crosses the threshold, Will takes the clip out of his hair and lets his bangs fall into his face. He pulls his phone from his pocket, and surreptitiously glances through his lashes at where he’s walking; he ducks his head in mimicry of someone entirely absorbed with what they’re doing. He is careful, not walking too fast or too slow to trip himself on his heels, as he exits and heads for the commuter lot.

Home is the safest place for him now. If they’re coming for him soon, they’ll need a warrant to cross his threshold. And no matter what Freddie thinks she knows, she’ll never be able to give the FBI more than a nudge in his direction, and certainly nothing that constitutes probable cause.

There's no evidence to be found that won't take extensive foreknowledge of his whereabouts at any given time. Hell, he's given himself alibis by posting via VPN while he was out in public with Margot. All these recent measures he's taken with multiple devices have been the most extreme of their kind, but certainly not the first. Will has known from the very beginning that nothing is ever truly secret once it's hosted on a device that's capable of being breached.

It's less genius, more common sense. Of course, it figures that Freddie wouldn't think to take the appropriate precautions, and is vindictive enough to use her own shortcomings as petty vengeance.

The cold air stings the exposed tops of his feet, but fortunately there's no snow yet to complicate the long walk to his car. It is more fortunate yet that no one stops him, and soon Will is sitting in the driver's seat of his station wagon wondering what, exactly, he is supposed to do next.

Will's always known that he runs the risk of being exposed by what he does. He's just never faced the threat quite so head-on before.

He has his phone in his hand in a moment, finger poised over the *dial* button before he has the presence of mind to stop. Disgust with his own reliance follows; it's not up to Hannibal to solve his problems or coach him through tough patches. Will has survived his whole life on his own, and he's not about to give in to petulant need.

One hand pushes his hair back from his face, and Will laughs within the cold confines of his self-made prison.

Fuck. *Fuck.*

In his bag, his secondary phone begins to buzz.

Will scrambles for it and sighs in relief as he answers on the fourth ring. "Hi, Miriam?"

"Hey. I managed to get copies of the old files you were looking for. Where's a good place to pass those along?"

Oh, sweet plausible deniability. Perhaps luck is in Will's favor, after all. "How far are you from College Park?"

"Not insurmountable. Wait—you want me to hand off stolen files to you at, like, a campus Starbucks in front of a million witnesses? You've gotta be kidding me."

Will smiles to himself, faint and wry. "Who says anyone has to see us?"

It goes like this: Miriam, in her uniform blues, arrives and orders a coffee. She picks out a table in the corner, and slips the file in between the booth and the wall. She finishes the cup, and dutifully does not look at Will waiting in line as she leaves; when Will takes her spot with his refilled travel mug (not nearly as delicious as Hannibal's coffee, but caffeinated enough to be passable), he takes the file and puts it in his satchel. They never speak, or even come within arm's reach of one another. Even if the Starbucks *did* have security cameras, it would have been a photofinish drop.

Will has been sighted on campus in what will be considered a routine coffee run; credit card statements will confirm this. Within half an hour, he's back in his car and headed for safety and home. Both he and Miriam know better than to contact each other directly for another few days.

In the meantime, Will has a plan.

Home is a half-hour's drive from campus, but with Will constantly looking in his rearview, it feels more like an hour. He holds his breath as he passes every cop on the Beltway, waiting to be pulled over for something inane and taken in for questioning. Anxiety makes itself present and known at the forefront of his mind as Will drives beneath that damned overpass at the Maryland state line and crosses into Virginia. The evening sun is blinding, barely past 5 o'clock and already sinking below the horizon in melting pools of gold and orange and red across the sky. Come another month or two, it'll be dark by 4:30; the darkness creeping slowly onward until the midwinter solstice beats it back, the constant push and pull of seasons.

Wolf Trap has a certain quietness about it in the winter. Though the peak of the season hasn't yet hit in the form of snowfall, the air fogs Will's breath as he parks his car in the driveway and climbs out. Hannibal's coat is over-sized around him but holds the warmth better for it; body heat caught in the crevices meant to be filled by broader shoulders, a wider chest. The belt keeps it in place and accentuates Will's waist, and under the right circumstances, allows him to skirt the line of passing as female.

Now, though, there is no one to care what he looks like as he climbs his porch with his boots held in hand and bag over his shoulder. Will fumbles with the key in the front door. Winston darts out into the yard when it finally swings open, urgently seeking a bathroom break, and Will heads inside.

He kicks off his heels in the doorway, his bare feet cold on the old wooden floors. Will goes through the house turning on lights, and lights a fire in the hearth. He puts the kettle on the old gas range to boil, strips out of Margot's hand-me-downs, and changes into soft flannel pants, mismatched wool socks, and an old, oil-stained tee shirt. He washes his face free of makeup. Puts his hair up, and pins his bangs back. He becomes the person his father would recognize, and not the facsimile of Margot Verger that he's made himself since Beau's death. He keeps moving because he has to, and because the knowledge of what he's obtained is chewing at the edges of his fraying soul, and it has teeth.

He lets Winston in. In a fit of raw panic and emotion, Will goes down to the floor and lets the old dog knock him over, lay on his chest and lick his face until he's damp with slobber.

The Chesapeake Ripper's file sits on the kitchen table. Will sits in his entryway and shivers with the cold until a familiar voice in the back of his mind whispers *stand up,* so Will does.

The kettle whistles; Will makes himself a cup of peppermint tea with a heaping spoon of honey that's half-crystallized with age. He can't remember the last time he drank tea instead of coffee. But for some reason, the smell of it is comforting. Isn't peppermint supposed to settle the stomach? As Will puts the box of tea bags back into the nearly-empty pantry, he feels pretty damn nauseous.

There are answers before him. Answers that he's too fucking nervous to look for. They're right *there*, and he can't…

He grabs his cup and leans back against the counter, allowing the heat transfer to warm his hands. Will looks at his kitchen, then at the old fridge and snorts to himself—a grimy old top-freezer affair running on fumes and hope, much like the range. His home is comfortable, but everything within it is dated. There is nothing sleek or minimalist about it; it's cluttered, filled with old possessions that hold

little to no monetary value. Even the mug from which he drinks tea is chipped and faded, nothing like the enamel-coated coffee cup that Hannibal lent him this morning.

Will is much the same—chipped and faded with careless wear and tear. Even now, the good and impossible fortune that brought Hannibal into his life is nearly unbelievable. And yet, here he is, hands shaking and heart racing with anticipation as he looks at a manila folder across the room that he almost doesn't dare to touch. Anticipatory, not for his lover, but for the man that would gladly see Will cut open and bleeding raw.

Would he? a voice whispers inside. *Would he?*

He ignores it. Finally, he moves to the kitchen table and sits down. Places the mug almost out of his reach, and uses the space to spread the pictures out before him. He doesn't want to read the reports yet. He just needs to *see,* and read what they said afterward. He sorts them into lines, consecutive photos for each crime scene. Prior to Caldwell, there were nine bodies.

Will now holds the culmination of his killer's work in the form of film. Still life photography of a much larger scene. Some of the ambiance will be lost, but Will's imagination can make up for the rest.

He shuffles the first line of photos into a stack. Stares deeply at the film, and allows it to consume him. He pictures The Hanged Man gently swaying from the overpass; Wilhelmina's dangling feet as she stares down at him and murmurs *no one knows him like we do.*

The images blur into one form, a pendulum of light. It swings, and Will is taken somewhere else.

A headless, limbless torso mounted in the National Gallery of Art, encased in a glass box among masterpieces. The skin and flesh are pale, and the cuts are clean. This is a bust of living marble, an organic sculpture of my own making. My tastes are classic. My art is just as much about appreciating the human form as the old masters, but I have the bravery to make what they did not with the materials that are my right. But this is not about the murder; it's about me. When law enforcement removes the box, the entire museum's alarm system will be triggered. Look what I can do. Look at who I am. I have gotten in and out undetected, and I'm smarter than you. Death is my artwork. This is my design.

A woman is bound by the wrists at end of a pier on Kent Island among luxury yachts and extravagant sailboats. I find it amusing to inconvenience the rich, who will doubtlessly be infuriated and nauseated with a show of such violence. They are blind to the realities of the world, and so was she—I have removed her eyes, her ears, her tongue, her nose, and her lips. I have removed her senses from her and hollowed out her insides, and she is half-submerged below the water. Her lower half has been left to be scavenged by the soft-shelled crabs that are in season in the Chesapeake Bay. Let the privileged realize that what they consume is no exotic delicacy, but a creature like any other. It is hungry, and it eats. As they are eaten, so too would they eat anyone else, given the opportunity. I enjoy the irony. I enjoy opening others' eyes to the cruelties of the world. This is my design.

A man in his Sunday best sits in the Basilica of the Assumption. He is in the first pew; I have made of him a devout follower. His head is bent in supplication, and there is a Bible in his lap. It sits closed between his hands, which have been removed at the wrist beneath pristine white shirt cuffs. Around his ring finger is a pale tan line; his wedding ring sits inside the cage of his teeth, and his tongue is absent. Inside the Bible is his tongue as a place-marker, and highlighted within it is Zephaniah 3:13. ***They will do no wrong; they will tell no lies. A deceitful tongue will not be found in their mouths. They will eat and lie down and no one will make them afraid.*** *This man is an arrogant boaster to*

infuriate even the Lord, and he has tried my patience. Look at him. He valued his own self-importance over everything, even the commitments he has made. I have no patience for a man who cannot hear anything but his own voice. This is my design.

A man wearing a truly audacious cowboy hat sits against a concrete wall in an urban alleyway with his stomach torn open—

Headlights shine in Will's eyes as a car pulls into the drive. He sputters, breathing hard, and flattens his hands across the table with force. For a moment, he is lost somewhere between reality and the world of the Ripper's consciousness. He forgets how to breathe. How to function. How to remember that car lights in a place as remote as Wolf Trap means *company,* means *interruption,* means *trouble.*

Will shoves all the photographs back in the folder in no particular order. He bares his teeth as he stalks into the dark and shaded places of his home, looking for a hiding place, and *there*— quickly and on autopilot, Will unlocks the gun safe that holds his father's hunting rifle and pistol and shoves the file inside. He closes the door and spins the lock just as someone knocks on the door.

Will takes a deep breath. His mind races. He is still half-lost to the Ripper's consciousness, and fights the urge to go to the counter and pull a knife from his drawer.

He thinks of Hannibal, and how upset and disappointed he'd be to find Will in prison. With several deep breaths sucked through his teeth, Will changes tactics. He embraces calm, and picks up his mug of tea.

If the FBI wants him, they will have to work hard for him. Will doesn't intend to make it easy.

But as he rounds the threshold of kitchen to living room, it's not a sharply-dressed agent he finds at his door. Will's mouth drops open as he hastens to unlock his deadbolt.

"*Margot?"* He exclaims, and takes in her flushed cheeks and million-watt smile. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"I told you I was gonna bring these by," she says, and kicks at a rolling suitcase at her feet—flanked by a second, and a third.

Will blanches. "You never said when."

"Well, I'm here now," she says, bright with cheer. "So let me in and get me a drink and we'll make a night of it. Here, help me carry these—"

They struggle to carry the bags in, for even with wheels, each are weighty and over-full. By the time they lay across Will's bed, there's only one chair and kitchen stools to sit on; Margot gleefully takes over the recliner with a whiskey tumbler in her hand, feet kicked up over one arm, hair streaming in a glossy wave over the other.

And then Will notices the red marks around her wrist.

Margot frowns when she notices him looking, and surreptitiously tugs the sleeve of her sweater down over the budding bruise. "It's nothing; I tripped and Mason helped me up. He's stronger than he looks."

Will scowls. He reads the flash of uneasiness in her eyes and calls it out. "Don't lie to me."

“Yeah, and what about you? I see those scratches on your face, Will. I don’t take the good doctor for the hitting type, so are we gonna talk about that?” Margot tosses back the whiskey and sets the glass on the side table with a grimace. “We really have to get you better shit, hon.”

“Don’t change the subject,” Will says with an impatient sigh and his heart in his throat, aware that he himself is doing just that.

Margot gestures to the bags. It’s a command for a compromise, so Will yields. He sets his mug of tea off to the side and approaches the first suitcase with wariness. Even though he believes he’s mentally prepared himself, he’s could *never* be fully prepared for the opulence he finds.

Silk. Satin. Gossamer. Rhinestones. Intricate beading. Pearls. Texture, color, a sensory overload of extravagance stares back at him, and Margot can no more stay seated than Will can bring himself to touch the dresses she’s brought for him. She springs to her feet, all hurts forgotten, and fishes them one by one from the case and hangs them on any horizontal surface she can find. Reds, blues, greens, golds, violets—rainbow and jewel tones, and Will ends up staring with wide eyes and a thrumming heart at what must be tens, if not *hundreds* of thousands of dollars worth of designer garments. And this is just the first suitcase.

They’re all hand-me-downs, of course. But in Will’s new association with Hannibal, he’s starting to appreciate what the value of even hand-me-downs might *mean.*

Margot smiles at him with amusement and pity. “You look freaked. I know it’s not about the dresses. Is it about the number of them, or the dollar signs I see screaming inside your pretty little head?”

“Little bit of both,” Will breathes. He swallows hard.

“So I guess I’ll have to distract you,” she replies simply. Margot plucks the first hanger from where she’s miraculously suspended it over Will’s doorway, and holds it up in front of his body with a considering frown. “Tell me about your doctor. How’s it going?”

Will’s heart leaps to his throat. He is immediately and sufficiently distracted.

When he doesn’t answer quickly enough to her standards, Margot looks up. Her eyes, green as sea glass, glimmer in the light. They widen. “Oh my god. You totally fucked.”

“We didn’t,” Will protests weakly. It’s not entirely a lie, but certainly not the truth. His cheeks flare hot, and he glances down at the gown held up to his body; shakes his head once. Gold isn’t his color.

“Will Graham, you’re a lying liar who lies.” Margot carelessly folds the dress over itself and drops it into the open suitcase. Retrieves the next. “Tell me everything.”

Will scowls. “He stole my bank info,” he says unhappily, and takes in the array of ball gowns, the different cuts and silhouettes. Tries to imagine himself wearing any of them and can’t quite picture himself in something so fine.

“I’m sensing a *but.* ”

“He put five *thousand* dollars into my account.”

Margot shoots Will a sidelong glance. She holds a rather stunning lavender piece with a full skirt and ruched bodice and dismisses it just as easily. “Okay, and?”

Will crosses his arms over his chest. His teeth clench. “Are all rich people like this?” He snaps.

Margot rolls her eyes good-naturedly and shakes her head. “If you have a problem with five thousand, I don’t even want to mention how much some of these dresses cost.”

Will’s fists clench. “What he did is different. This is just borrowing.”

Margot squints at him, and turns to face him directly. “Will,” she says patiently. “All these dresses are mine from old events. I can’t *wear* any of them again, the society section of *The Sun* would go ballistic. Not to mention Vogue and Bazaar—I’d end up in their column of fashion repeats. Now, Doctor Lecter’s a nice man, and he’s got great taste, but he’s not a go-to fashion icon for the masses. If *you* wear something of mine, no one will notice outside of how beautiful you look.”

Margot plucks another gown from where it’s draped over his bookcase and strides over. She holds it up in front of him, and when she smiles, her expression is soft and fond. She is the sister he’s never had, his voice of outside reason. But all of this seems so unreasonable, and Will just can’t move past it.

“How do you feel about blue or green?” Margot asks, and looks him over. “They look great with your skin tone and accent your eyes.”

“I—”

“Hang on.” Margot drops the dress. It falls into a pile of satin and silk on the floor, and she steps over it like a woman on a mission. Her eyes are wide, and she bumps up against Will’s chest as she invades his space and reaches for him. Moves a stray curl that has fallen from his bun, and her eyes light up as she touches his earlobe.

Margot’s expression flickers with happiness and melts into pure, raw satisfaction. “These are beautiful, Will. He bought these for you?”

Will’s face goes hot. His heart thumps once with joy at Margot’s approval, and at the memory of Hannibal putting them in for him this morning. Kissing in the kitchen, in the driveway. His affectionate regard, his gently possessive touch. “Yeah, um. Yeah, he did.”

“Oh, I *love* his taste,” Margot says. Her eyes glitter, and she pats Will’s cheek; holds his face in her hands, and gently guides him down to kiss his forehead. “You deserve it, Will. You deserve someone to look after you all the time when I can’t, who’s gonna take care of you.” She smooths away the pink print of her lipstick with the pad of her thumb, and drags Will forward into a hug.

Will collapses into her like a dying star. He tucks his face into her shoulder, feels her smooth hands and slender arms on the back of his neck and shoulders as she embraces him. The truth inside his ribs pools and rises along his insides, up his throat until it pours out in a waterfall. “I went to yell at him, and I was a mess, and he didn’t even care. He just let me yell, and when I talked he listened, and I…”

Will laughs once, bitterly, pulls himself upright. Margot smiles, ever-indulgent, and her hands find purchase on Will’s shoulders. She sways from side to side, and Will’s palms settle on her hips. They move in slow, simple circles like children at a middle-school dance, rocking along to the beat of nothing but their hearts in Will’s living room.

His cheeks flare red at the memory of being lifted, crowded back against the stainless doors of Hannibal’s refrigerator. Margot’s smile widens at the changes she sees on his face. “Angry sex. You hooked up.”

Will licks his lips. He nods once, and then chuffs out a laugh. “Yeah. Against the fridge. We couldn’t make it anywhere else.”

Margot makes a noise of pride, of intrigue. “Spicy.”

Will snorts. *“Stop,”* he begs, though without heat. His mouth opens again, but he finds himself hesitating. “And.”

His teeth sink into his lower lip, and Will glances away.

“And?” She asks. Margot taps him insistently with her open palm. “Don’t leave me hangin’. I have to live my best gay life vicariously through you.”

“I slept there. In his bed, and he held me,” Will murmurs. Then, it all just… spills. “It wasn’t the first time. And I…”

Margot’s eyes widen. She blinks at him in silent wonder as the cogs turn in her head, her knowledge of Will’s solitude and his mannerisms adding themselves together with the image she holds in her head of Will’s… *whatever* he is.

Boyfriend, he thinks.

It sounds so juvenile, but that’s what he is, isn’t he? Someone who wants Will around unconditionally, wants to care for him and cook for him and give him gifts. Someone who doesn’t shy away from Will’s fascination with killers (or one in particular). Someone who enjoys his presence and has talked about a future together with him, whether or not it can ever be true.

They’re *dating*, and Hannibal is his—

Beloved, Wilhelmina whispers.

The revelation is bright and shocking, conducted by the truth of the night like lightning striking water before it forces its way out of him. “Margot, I’m falling in love with him. I can’t stop.”

Their swaying comes to a halt.

Margot blinks. Stares. Her mouth opens silently, unable to speak. Then, the corners of her lips tilt up. “I told you,” she says lovingly, and pats Will’s cheek. “That you were flat on your ass.”

Will swallows hard, and laughs once. He looks around at all the opulent gowns that look so out of place in his ramshackle house, to Winston lying in front of the fire, and down at his own tee-shirt, smeared with the shadows of engine grease that never quite washed out. He wonders how he ever thought this was going to turn out any other way.

“I know it probably won’t work,” Will says, and rubs idly at his eyes with the back of one hand. His lashes are still tacky with the residue of mascara. “I know I’m going to disappoint him somehow, even though he keeps saying I won’t. I’m just not the right type of person for him, but I…” Will sniffs, and forces a smile. “I want to be, even if it’s only for a little while.”

“Oh, fuck that,” Margot says with a smile, and gently shakes him once, twice. “Will. Hon. Listen to me.” She waits until Will meets her eyes before she starts. “This is what we’re gonna do. First, we’re gonna pick out a dress. We’re gonna figure out accessories. We’re gonna make you a twelve out of ten, and if your doctor’s not *also* already flat on his ass, you’re gonna put him there with a *va-va-voom*.”

She strokes over his shoulder blades with her thumbs, rubs concentric circles like a coach talking up their athlete, and Will would laugh if his insides weren't twisting themselves into knots.

"Then I'm gonna teach you everything I know about society and put your big, beautiful brain to work. The ins and outs, the faces you should know, etiquette, the whole shebang. By the end of it all, no one will ever know you weren't a debutante, and your sugar daddy will be ruined for anyone else."

Will chokes. *"Margot."*

"What?" She says with a vivacious wink. "I'm right. Those are Mikimoto pearls, babe. You're marrying into money and good taste. Proud of you."

"Marrying—" Will swallows hard and exhales through his nose. "You know what, I'm just gonna ignore you and get back to looking."

"Probably wise." Margot grins as Will pulls away and turns his back on her. He clenches his hands over and again, trying to work feeling back into his limbs after the sheer shock that the word *marrying* put to his spine. Margot carries on without noticing, or perhaps she simply doesn't care about his mental upset. "But I was right the first time, you know. I'm gonna be right again."

"Not listening," Will says to combat the pleased and panicked thrumming of his heart. "I don't know if I like any of these."

"Kay, so let's try the next batch." Margot rounds up the dresses and folds them, careless of WIll's wince at her treatment of the priceless garments. At his look, she shrugs and says, "Wrinkles come out with some dry-cleaning." She packs them away and zips the first case closed; opens the second.

They stand hip-to-hip, and Will looks down with a contemplative frown, silently weighing colors and cuts until—

"Wait," he says.

Reaches in, and pulls one out. Holds it carefully at arm's length, and slowly sighs. Imagines himself at Hannibal's side, and despite the nervous, frenetic energy that flutters in his chest, he *can,* and in his mind, it looks *right.*

"Yeah," Will murmurs. "This one."

Margot smiles. "Good choice."

Chapter End Notes

if you like it, please share it! reblog on tumblr here.

2:8

Chapter Notes

/breathes deeply ok, work week hell is over. chapter is finished. thank you to all the loyal readers who have been super patient with my updates getting later and later in the day as my work gets increasingly more hectic. the independence day sale at work is FINALLY done, so hopefully things will calm down now!!! ~~and just in heckin time, tomorrow is my birthday and im gonna just fuckin yolo and drink and do WHATEVER i want and maybe get some lakeside writing time in.~~

here's the new chapter, and i'll be replying to comments from the last one hopefully later tonight!! thank you for all your love and support, you really have no idea how it helps me get through my days. <3 <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The weekend fades back into the week in a Margot-shaped blur. Will is crammed full of more knowledge about socialites and their entourages than he has ever wanted, but it has the fortunate side-effect of giving him no time for anxiety. Whether a blessing or a curse, the FBI has not yet closed in on Will, nor did they spring from the shadows upon his return to class on Monday, or even Tuesday. Freddie's glares are far from subtle, but what can she do? She has no proof. And if the FBI has not yet come knocking on his door, then they, too, must know it.

But the distance grates. The time apart is a strain. Though Will calls Hannibal every night, he longs for a kiss or a kind touch. The murmurs in his ear aren't enough to satisfy, and even Hannibal's assurances that Will should take the time he needs to get his work done don't quite hit home.

He doesn't *want* to be responsible, or finish his essays, or sit on hold with his bank (though his account being cleared was surely worth the effort it took), or be told *one more goddamn time* which fork he's supposed to use first.

"Margot," Will says, long-suffering, staring down at her mock-up dinner template on his kitchen table. "You couldn't have just shown me this stuff on Google?"

"None of the diagrams could agree on the order of the cutlery," she replies dismissively. Raises her eyes to his, and crosses her arms over her chest. She's wearing one of Will's old sweatshirts over jeans that cost close to a thousand dollars. She doesn't seem to understand why Will finds either of those things absurd. "Repeat it back, left to right. Go."

Will sighs through his nose, and points to each piece of his own thrift-store dinnerware, made to look like a formal place setting. "Salad fork, fish fork, entree fork. Bread plate, bread knife stationed above them. In the center is the salad plate, underneath is the soup bowl, service plate at the bottom. Then we have the salad knife, then the entree knife, *then* the fish knife, in that order. Though why the hell they don't just keep it in order—"

Margot waves her hand vaguely. “Irrelevant. The fish knife looks different, you’ll know it when you see it. Some places keep it in order, you’ll know by the shape of the knife. Go on.”

Will growls under his breath, and brushes his bangs out of his eyes, then pushes the frames of his new glasses up his nose. They’re wire frames, slim and delicate, far from his preferred large-framed lenses —but Margot insisted that these were more classic and suited the shape of his face, and well. There’s really no *arguing* with Margot Verger. Obviously. “Soup spoon, tea spoon. Seafood fork at the end. Dessert fork and spoon up above.”

“Glasses?”

“Water. The fuller-domed glasses are for red wine, the medium ones are for white. The skinny one is for champagne, and the short one is for sherry or dessert wine. Might be some of them, or none of them. Depends on the course.”

Margot nods once. The corners of her lips curl in approval. “Good, Will. Also, once dinner’s over and we’re on to the performance and the mingling, you’re gonna be sticking with me when you’re not with the good doctor. Don’t worry about tips for restroom attendants or anything, I’ll take care of it. The charity auction is boring; we’re just gonna drink and mingle.”

Will grimaces, and levels her with a glance over his artfully-arranged but modge-podge cutlery. “And mingling is less boring?”

“Rude,” she drawls without missing a beat, and heads for the living room. “O–*kay,* and now we’re going over waltzing again, so put your heels and your dress on, hon—”

Will’s phone rings. His heart leaps. He dives for it where it waits on the kitchen table, buzzing, and in his haste, knocks over a plastic martini glass that had taken the place of a champagne flute. It rolls back and forth on the worn wooden surface, but Will pays it no mind as he swipes the slider on the screen to the right and folds himself inside a familiar voice. “Hi.”

“Hello, darling. I hope I’m not interrupting your evening.”

Will smiles, a helpless tug of his lips and a pull at his heart. “No, you’re not interrupting.”

Somewhere behind him, Margot exclaims, “*Hey!* Thanks a lot!”

He can hear Hannibal’s surprise. *“You have company? I can call later if you’re busy.”*

“I’m not busy.”

“Will!”

Hannibal huffs quietly, part-amused. *“Don’t be rude, my dear.”*

Will rolls his eyes at Margot, who for her part, looks far too intrigued and not nearly offended enough. “Is that your doctor? Tell him I say hi.”

He snorts. Chokes, when Hannibal says, *“Do I have a reputation among your peers? I’m not sure if I should be intimidated or flattered.”*

“Neither,” Will replies with a droll smirk, and smiles at Margot’s mock-offended huff.

“Wow, okay, I’m rescinding my seal of best-friend approval. Obviously he brings out the worst in you.”

Will can hear the smile in Hannibal’s voice when he asks, *“Oh? Is that true?”*

“You two are never allowed to meet!” Will snaps, though grinning, and when Margot shrugs her passive approval and forgiveness, Will nods his thanks and excuses himself into the living room. He pinches the phone between his cheek and shoulder as he shrugs on the wool coat, seeking the privacy of the outdoor porch.

“Who is this friend of yours?”

“Don’t worry,” Will replies, exasperated and droll, and kicks on his work boots without tying the laces, “you’ll meet her soon.”

“Is this that important friend you so mysteriously warned me of all those days ago?”

“Don’t give her any ideas.” Will smiles through the gripe, and lets himself out onto the deck. He smiles at Margot’s distant sounds of protest as he does so. “How was work?”

“The same. Class?”

“Uneventful.” Will leans against the outside railing with a private smile and indulges in the chilly winter air, and the warmth of wool. Its weight almost feels like arms around his shoulders, though there’s no sensation that could ever adequately replace the sensation of Hannibal’s embrace. He nudges his face up against one of the pillars that suspends the roof above, if only to feel the touch of something on his cheeks, even if it’s cold. “I miss you.”

Hannibal makes a quiet noise that sounds far too pleased, but similarly wanting—a hum of acknowledgement, of humor, of something akin to longing. *“And I miss you. But your education is important, and so is time with your friends. Though I admit I would monopolize you jealously if I had the chance.”*

“Well, finals are soon,” Will says tentatively. “Winter break until January. And after that, it’s only one more semester until—” He chokes on the words. Until *what?* What *exactly* does he think is going to happen once he graduates?

Hannibal chuckles. *“Well, depending on what sector of work you go into after graduating, that may lend itself to either far more or far less free time.”* There’s a shuffling on the other end of the line, a clink of glass. Hannibal must be in the kitchen. *“What will you be doing for your winter break?”*

Will turns around when he hears scratching behind him—Winston has pawed open the heavy front door, which was only barely closed over. He’s eager to be let out, and darts into the yard when Will opens the storm door. Will laughs to himself as the old dog zooms into the dark to sniff at trees and disturb whatever critters he can find that aren’t already hibernating. “Well, it’s almost rifle season for deer. Back when my dad was around, we’d go every year and try to get at least one. I’ve got a few acres and I have an agreement with the neighbor, so I might go out for a few days and see what I can get, at least before it’s cold enough for ice fishing. By December, maybe.”

Another sound of intrigue—this one more intent, fiercely interested. *“I wasn’t aware you hunted.”*

“I’m passable with a gun and a knife,” Will says with a shrug into the dark. “Most of the time, I prefer fishing. But if I manage to bag a deer, assuming you like venison, I can bring you some.”

“It’s rare I have someone else supply food for my table. Should the opportunity arise, I’d be honored to share your kill with you, mylimasis.”

Will snorts softly, but his cheeks heat with pleasure. “Well, alright then.” A thought strikes him. “Do you hunt?”

“Since my early childhood, but only ever for food,” Hannibal replies. He sounds like he’s smiling. *“Though now my schedule is far busier. I patronize a particularly talented butcher instead, though I still appreciate the great skill and patience of hunters. And, of course, fishermen.”*

“Flatterer,” Will murmurs. He stares out into the field and, despite his better judgement, imagines Hannibal with him, here at his little house and all its oddities, its staggering lack of opulence. He imagines Hannibal at his side as they stalk into the night under the moonlit shadow of tree cover, two wraiths moving in the pursuit of prey. For a moment, he imagines lying side by side on their bellies, breaths slow and even as Will looks through the sights of his rifle.

Then it changes. Becomes, not passive waiting, but active running. And the deer is not a deer, but the panicked stumblings of a man, and the figure at his side is a creature made of darkness with a crown of antlers. He’s shaped like Hannibal, and he grins at Will with a mouthful of fangs. They are monsters in the prime of their health and joy, and—

Will swallows hard. Shakes himself out of it. He’s not in the woods, he’s on his own porch. Perhaps analyzing the Ripper’s crime scenes has left a hunger for blood in Will’s mind. Certainly the knowledge of the Ripper’s unconventional diet has lingered in the forefront of Will’s thoughts.

What must it be like, consuming their fellow men?

The words slip out. Will barely realizes it’s his voice that says, “Maybe someday we’ll share a hunt, and not just the kill.”

The sound of Hannibal’s breathing on the other line is, for a moment, nearly devastating. Shocking. Will kicks himself, feels panic in his throat, and nearly takes it back, but doesn’t for worry it’ll make this worse. He fears he’s broken something beautiful, or at least battered it with his impulsivity. But then, in a whisper-quiet fizzle of static on the line, Hannibal laughs. *“To hunt at your side, Will, would be a fierce pleasure.”*

The relief is staggering. Will’s fingers splay over his pounding heart as he sags against the porch bannister and tries to breathe. To play it off. He can do that. He just has to *focus* on what the hell is coming out of his mouth.

Lighter is better. A distraction is best. “Well, if you’ve been at it since before I was born, you might have to teach me a thing or two, old man.”

“Insolent,” Hannibal replies in his ear, low and dark and shiveringly intimate. The growl of his voice goes straight to Will’s belly, warms the depths of him and the base of Will’s spine. Hannibal does not seem very distracted at all, and his surprising intrigue clenches at the base of Will’s spine. *“I would gladly teach you everything I know.”*

Will bites back a moan. He’s always been an eager student, and the thought of Hannibal at his back with his steady surgeon’s hands guiding Will’s knife through the ligaments of a carcass is a powerful one. Frightening, as when he imagines it, Hannibal’s face seems to lose its distinct features, and be consumed by darkness, and bloom bright red eyes from the hollows of an antlered skull. Terrifying, with how ready Will’s mind seems to be to merge the figures of Hannibal and the Ripper together.

They're not alike. They're nothing alike. Possessiveness and intellect aside, surgical knowledge and —

No, Will nearly snarls. *Stop it. He deserves better than that.*

They *both* do.

In the amphitheatre of Will's mind, he places himself between the shadow of the Ripper and Hannibal's silhouette backlit by the moon. With gentle but insistent hands, he pushes them apart, away from one another, until they are distinct and separate. They both stare at him. They both reach for him.

Before they can touch, Will opens his eyes and forces himself into reality. He leans against the railing, and tries desperately to ground himself with the sounds of Margot shuffling in the living room through the thin walls. "And if I said I *did* want to learn everything you know?"

"It may take some time."

That, at least, pulls a smile from Will. "I'm a fast learner."

Hannibal chuckles, a sensual caress. Will's teeth sink into his lower lip at the sound of it. It stings. *"I have no doubt. But a steady hand is best learned with experience."*

Will gets the impression they're no longer speaking of deer hunting. His chest is warm and fluttery, bursting, and Will would roll himself under the weight of Hannibal's body if he could. Sequester himself there, and allow himself to be jealously consumed by a beautiful and capricious man whose wish is to bring Will to the highest heights with pleasure and purpose. Remind himself where he is, and who he would gladly be with. Will's voice drops to an echoing murmur, and despite the fact that he feels foolish for it, he feels… powerful. "Was my hand not steady enough to satisfy you?"

Hannibal purrs, a quiet vibration that Will can nearly feel ghosting in his chest as it rumbles along the line. *"Were you here with me, or even alone where you are, I would have no compunctions about telling you how satisfied you made me."*

Will's hands clench around the porch raining. He feels heat well in his cheeks, his heart. "Hannibal," he whispers helplessly.

"Will," he replies, warm and wanting. *"If you're amenable, when your winter recess arrives, it would please me if you'd stay for a few days. Perhaps around the holidays, if you have no other plans."*

Will's heart stutters. "Like for Christmas?"

"Yes."

Will smiles to himself. His mind is bright and vibrant with affection. The stars glow brighter in the night—but, Will realizes, it's only because the motion light on the porch has gone out with his stillness. How could he ever doubt Hannibal? Whatever it is inside his thoughts that is causing him to doubt, it's foolish. It's wrong. *This* is Hannibal. His Hannibal. "That's still a ways away."

"Yes, I know. I thought I'd put in my bid early."

"Are you sure you'll still like me by then?"

"The only thing I would ever allow to separate us would be your say-so, Will."

Will licks his lips. Closes his eyes, and clenches his teeth to keep a set of words inside that it's not his right to say. Not yet. Not *yet.* "Then, um." He swallows hard. "I guess you'd be glad to know I don't plan on saying so, huh?"

"Very glad." The sound rumbles directly into Will's ear, raises shivers like a hand trailing down over his belly to touch his fluttering abdomen, slip beneath his clothes with the intent to *own* him. Will presses his thighs together and squirms with such force the automatic porch light turns back on. *"I'm afraid wine and distance make me bold to border on rude, mylimasis. I find myself not thinking or caring much how long I've kept you from your guest."*

"She can wait," Will whispers. "Yes, I want—I want to stay with you. I'll ask my neighbor to watch Winston when the time comes, so I can just…" He takes a breath and slowly exhales. "Be there, with you, and not have to worry about anything else for a little while."

Hannibal murmurs his approval. *"That's all I could hope for. I'll have to think of things we can do together in Baltimore."*

"Just being with you would be—" The words, the confession feels awkward. Will nearly chokes on it, but instead he stumbles. "Good."

To his credit, Hannibal seems to find it endearing, but is not one to pass on a chance to tease Will after being teased so mercilessly for his age. *"Just good?"*

"Better watch out or I'll demote you to *okay,*" Will retorts. He smiles. Hides his face, though he knows he isn't seen, and tucks it into the collar of Hannibal's coat. The scent of him has nearly faded from the wool. Will wants to fix that, desperately and soon. "I'm joking. I miss you," he admits. "I know I said it already. And I know I'm the reason we've been apart this long, but it's true."

"I understand, Will. You don't have to explain. You have responsibilities to attend to. I'll admit though I find myself keenly noticing your absence, I'm gratified by the thought that my presence is such a distraction to you."

"Well," Will replies softly, "what I'm doing now will benefit both of us, I hope."

A sound of interest. "*Really? What makes you say that?"*

"Obviously I can't tell you, or I'll ruin the surprise." Will huffs a laugh, then straightens his head, and whistles out into the night. Winston comes crashing through the tall, dead grass, and lands squarely on the porch, tongue lolling and spilling steam into the air, tail wagging. Will clicks his tongue and pushes off the porch; holds the door open, and Winston darts inside. Will is left alone again, but the light inside beckons him back to warmth. He stops when he hears Hannibal's voice.

"Is it selfish of me to ask when I might see you?" Hannibal asks. *"Before Saturday, I hope."*

Will smiles softly. Nearly nuzzles against the phone with the depth of his fondness and affection, and barely restrains himself from letting a pleased hum slip from his chest. "I'll see if I can play hooky tomorrow."

"If your evening is occupied with your mysterious friend, I could take you out to lunch. There are a few places near Capitol Hill that wouldn't be far from your campus. I recall you have an afternoon recess on Wednesdays."

Will huffs a laugh. “Yeah, that’s right.” He’s undeniably pleased that Hannibal remembers. “What about you? Don’t you have to work?”

“No, not tomorrow. I traded shifts with Doctor Gideon at his request. I actually go in to work very soon, and I’ll be finished around eleven.”

“You won’t be too tired?”

“To see you?” Hannibal asks, as though Will’s question is especially ridiculous. *“No, Will, definitely not. Though I appreciate your concern.”*

“I meant to drive from Baltimore to College Park to DC and back after a twelve-hour shift.” Will leans against the doorway with a small, tight frown. He wants to see Hannibal badly, of course, but the thought of him exhausting himself on Will’s account…

“I’ve endured worse hours for far less of a reward.” Hannibal sounds amused, and terribly fond. *“It’s decided then, mylimasis. I’ll pick you up around noon.”*

Will’s heart flutters in his chest. Slowly, he smiles. Barely over half a day until he sees Hannibal again. It’s a damn nice surprise, and certainly something to look forward to. He laughs softly, and his grin grows until it hurts his cheeks. “Okay. Alright. Yeah, that sounds good.”

“I’ll be looking forward to it.” Will can hear his responding smile, his satisfaction. *“And you’re to let me take care of everything without fuss. You agreed, remember?”*

Will blinks, elation interrupted, and his mouth drops open in near-offense. “I did not.”

“I recall differently. Gifts and excursions fall under the same qualifications. Which means I would like you to allow me to treat you as you deserve, fine aesthetics and all.”

Will snorts softly, bumps his forehead against the doorway in pleased exasperation. He lowers his voice to a whisper so Margot doesn’t overhear. “So you want me to dress up pretty for you and let you parade me around without complaint?”

“Ideally, yes.” Hannibal’s voice once more settles into that distracting tenor, fed directly into Will’s ear. The muscles encasing Will’s ribs shudder, and his belly clutches hot with want. That intimate, deliberate tone has a direct line to Will’s cock. What Hannibal *says* only makes it worse. *“I like the way you blush when I do something you find ridiculous, that others would pay no mind to. You get this look on your face, like you’d like to fight me about it. The moment you give in and let me have my way is the sweetest surrender—that split-second of submission where you lower your eyes and your shoulders relax, deferring to me for a fraction of an instant. You make me work for you in a way that no one ever has. You would rather die than roll over mindlessly for me, Will, and it makes me appreciate every moment I spend in your company. Treasure your trust. So, yes—I want to see you as ferociously beautiful as I know you to be, and to have an afternoon in which you defer to my whims regarding your care. I want to see that flicker of your doubt melt away into belief, and to see the moment you realize that my sole priority is taking care of you. That every touch is for your pleasure, and my own because of it.”*

Will pushes the door closed more firmly than he’d like, and prays he hasn’t drawn Margot’s attention. He returns to the railing with his heart in his throat and swallows hard as he contemplates walking out into the field, if only for privacy. “*Han*nibal.”

Hannibal hums in self-satisfied inquiry, a sardonic little *hm?* that says he knows exactly what he did. Will finds that he doesn't have the words to finish his thought, if it was ever a complete thought at all.

"Speechless? My, what an accomplishment."

"Dick," Will replies swiftly and without heat, though his cheeks are still flushed hot and pink. "I just…" He has no defense. It's easier to distract, so he does. "It's just not easy for me to let others take care of me. It's not how I was raised."

"I'm quite aware. Fortunately for us both, I don't doubt your ability to care for yourself, Will, I just want to offset the strain, and to spoil you terribly."

Will huffs through his nose. "Oh, is that all?"

"No, not nearly, but it's enough to start, and a sweet enough thought to get me through the evening without you here."

For a long time Will is silent as those words swim inside him and form a current straight to his heart. It's strong, unyielding, not quite even, but nor is it entirely random. There's an intermittent pulsing inside him that he must attribute to the sensation of their hearts synchronizing over the distance between them. A sensation that is warming, bursting, aching with want and desperate with desire to be near.

He nearly says it, but he doesn't.

"Soon," Will says instead. He wants to be touched and reassured, so he wraps one arm around himself in the facsimile of an embrace. His reliance is… alarming. But can it really be considered a weakness, after everything Hannibal has done for him? After seeing undeniable proof that Hannibal is willing to accommodate his unconventionality and insipid fears? "After the Gala thing I'll have more free time again for a little while before finals. Ok?"

"I have no doubt you'll return to me, mylimasis. Or at the very least, I have confidence in my own persistence."

"So I guess you're not bored of me yet."

"No. Not even a little bit, no."

"Then I guess I have to work extra hard so I don't embarrass us on Saturday."

Another sound of interest. Will wonders where he is in the house, what he's doing. He finds he doesn't have the nerve to interrupt and ask. *"I'm curious about what you're up to."*

"You'll have to wait."

"Oh, I'm aware. Your commitment to keeping your mysteries is one of the most frustrating and intriguing things about you."

"Glad someone thinks so. Usually I just get yelled at for being a killjoy."

"Pity the person who has no appreciation for a secret well-kept, or for the loyalty of the secret keeper."

Will takes a step down, onto the top stair, and stops. He's being drawn away from the promising glow of his front door, and back out toward the waiting dark. "Maybe I'm only loyal to myself."

"Then you would have more integrity than most who deny their intrinsic selves, don't you think?" Hannibal replies. Will is so stricken by those words that for a moment, he can't speak or think or do more than feel opened up and hollowed out, trapped in this in-between. *"Knowing oneself and being loyal to your own desires and emotions is the most honest way a person can live. If that were true, I would admire you still. But I think we're both aware that your loyalty is multifaceted. It reflects onto many subjects in infinite beautiful refractions, each decision informed by the marriage of your intellect and your fealty. Some feel the warmth of your regard in that way. Others may linger in the shadows, drawn to your light as something foreign that they have never experienced for themselves. That you are ready and willing to bare pieces of your soul to the monsters in the dark will make you a terrifyingly efficient lure."*

Will stares down at the second step, and the third, and the frostbitten grass. When the confession comes, it's soft, and nearly an accident. "A lure implies wanting to catch."

"Do you not?"

Will closes his eyes, and imagines he can feel eyes on him, standing out among the distant trees. Instead, all he can hear is Hannibal's quiet breathing. A voice comes to his mind unbidden, a sensual purr that says, *catch and release.*

It frightens him.

Will opens his eyes. Turns his back on the darkness, and toward the light. Steps up onto the porch, toward the front door. He tells himself he's not running away, and that the return to the light is a return to his home. He's only half-sure it works. "I really should go. It's getting late, I need to finish up and go to bed."

For a moment, Hannibal is quiet. There is a pause in time, a suspended moment of silence. *"You may always speak freely to me, Will, without fear of consequence,"* he says at long last. *"I hope you know that."*

Will's fingers close around the door handle. Hannibal's coat feels like a second skin that is large enough for him to grow into, and the night at his back like a cloak of stars. Somewhere down off the porch, where the light fades into shadows, in the dry husks of the tall, dead grass is where Will would rather be right now. To walk out into the dark with no aim and no direction. Only his heart as a compass, with Hannibal's voice pressed against his ear, murmuring promises into his mind, and the certainty of the Ripper's silhouette stalking him through the labyrinth of barren trees sinking deep in the depths of his bones.

But inside waits Margot, and her promise to help Will for the betterment of himself. So he can situate himself more firmly into Hannibal's world. Embracing the wildness inside him will only lead him further away from this person he's growing to love.

So he returns. He has to.

"I know," Will lies softly, and follows it with a truth. "I appreciate it more than you know."

He is stricken with love and guilt in equal measures when Hannibal replies, *"I do know, mylimasis. I only wish you believed me."*

What more can he say? Will swallows hard and searches for words, and is mercifully spared when Hannibal takes pity on him.

"I look forward to seeing you tomorrow, Will. Sleep well."

Will laughs once. It's a painful thing, barbed with affection. "Do you think we'll ever have a normal phone conversation?"

Hannibal's voice is warm, so warm. *"I hope not."*

The shape of him glitters, glimmers. Margot's eyes shine with satisfaction, and though Will wears no makeup right now, his cheeks are still pink and hot from the earlier cold. He looks at himself in the age-worn full-length mirror and softly exhales.

"It's perfect," Margot says with a smile. She at his side still looks casually lovely in a designer pair of jeans and the ratty old UMD sweatshirt she steals every time she visits. "Are you ready?"

"I think the better question is are *you* ready," Will replies with a quiet snort. His heart flutters in his throat. It's hard to look and process what he sees as *him*. "It's your toes in danger."

"Give yourself more credit. I've seen you run in heels a thousand times."

"Not backwards."

Margot shakes her head fondly as she reaches over to the table and snatches up her phone. "Well, we'll start slow. But I think you'll do better than you realize."

"I hope so." Will fidgets in place. The skirt swishes around his legs, and he just hopes like hell he doesn't trip on it. "I don't want to embarrass him."

Margot presses *play,* then steps up to put her hand at Will's waist, and her other palm in his. "You won't. I'm a great teacher," she says with a wink. "And you've always been my best student."

The music begins. Margot gives him an encouraging smile, and Will takes a steadying breath.

"Then let's get to work."

Chapter End Notes

[reblog to save a birthday bitch]

2:9

Chapter Notes

> So so sorry for the delay in getting this up. I underestimated how tired my tattoo would make me and passed out early. Prayer circle for better time management next week. <3 Thank you so much for all the birthday wishes, I had an awesome day! I'll hopefully get around to answering comments tonight.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There's a certain comfort that comes in waking up beside someone that Will can't really explain. He's always been a solitary creature, the kind of person who has treasured his time alone. Maybe it's the uncertainty of what the Ripper has planned for him that is making him cherish what little company he has. But as Will turns over and sees Margot curled on her side on the mattress beside him, Winston sprawled across her legs, he's filled with affection and contentment.

Her hair's a mess. She barely threw it up into a ponytail before they crashed in the middle of the night. Margot, despite being an heiress, is also a farm girl—she rises with the sun to tend her horses and see to the estate's affairs, much like a queen overseeing the goings-on in her castle. She's not one for late nights. Seeing her in Will's pajamas for lack of anything better, sharing space with Will and his old dog, surrounded by the evidence of her impromptu etiquette lessons standing out so starkly in his home, so strange and out of place—

It's not the same as waking up beside Hannibal. But it's with a sudden sureness that Will realizes that he loves her—the sister he has never had, the person who has taught him all he knows, looked out for him and kept him on his feet, even at the sacrifice of her own comfort.

And when he sees the bruise on her wrist that has darkened to angry, livid shades of purple, and a matching one on her corresponding hip, Will realizes that in the interest of protecting him, she's not been disclosing everything about herself.

Mason. It *has* to be Mason, because no one else would ever get away with it, and from no one else would Margot… he hesitates to think the word *allow,* but in a sense, it's true. From no one else but Mason Verger would Margot allow herself to be treated this way. But it's so much deeper than that. He'd seen the signs in their adolescence, Margot's father clearly favoring Mason as his sole male heir, but that dissonance between the care he showed his children had widened into a chasm following the revelation of Margot's sexuality.

Molson Verger had, at one time, believed Will and Margot were secretly dating. Mason's *so-very-helpful* discovery and disclosure of Will's *deviancy* had been enough to kill that assumption in its cradle.

And then Molson had offered made Beau an offer, and it had all unravelled from there.

Will rolls out of bed and heads to the kitchen; puts a pot of coffee on that won't be anything like Hannibal's, but is passable enough to get him through the day. He makes and doctors Margot's coffee the way she likes, then brings it back to the living room and sets it on the side table. With a quiet click of his tongue, Winston is up and out the door.

Will lingers in the front doorway and takes in how different his property looks in the light of day. Where last night everything was ominous and equally promising, now he simply sees land, grass, flat fields. He sees his beat-up Volvo, and Margot's sleek Lexus beside it, faded blue and rich autumnal bronze. The mystery of his home has been washed away by grayish, overcast light. The wonder of it is gone, replaced with familiarity. Perhaps Hannibal's familiarity, too, will return to him with the light, and chase the Ripper's influence back to the photos suspended in Will's mind.

Doubting Hannibal is too close to blasphemy for Will to entertain. He's never lashed out at Will, has never been anything but perfectly patient and calm. Affectionate. Loving. Generous, gracious, protective, understanding, with steady hands that have healed him more than once, and touched him with reverent fervor.

Hannibal is safety and reason, a solid foundation upon which Will is meant to build himself. The Chesapeake Ripper is fire and smoke: dazzling, unpredictable, and dangerous. If Will takes too much of him into himself, he'll surely suffocate.

But he's already suffocating, isn't he? And last night, God, he was so prepared to burn.

If it weren't for Margot's presence to keep him tethered, the Ripper might have had him last night. If he'd been waiting in the dark for Will to wander out alone, Will's not sure where he would be this morning. Surely not seeing Hannibal in a few hours, or ever again. The thought comes with a reluctant, fluttering ache, torn between bursting anticipation and fearful uncertainty. Will's heart beats in his throat at the realization of how close he might've come to his own imminent disaster.

He'd been so stupid, taken such an unnecessary risk. And for what—a fever dream that the Ripper might want to *keep* him? He'd let Hannibal's words and the Ripper's intentions get messed up in his mind. Let them mix and blend to become something new. Something impossible.

Is it really so strange? Wilhelmina whispers in the back of his mind. *Think. Think.*

Will frowns. Stands taller, straighter, almost subconsciously. His chin lifts, and there is a new awareness, a new thread of consideration, a new train of thought that he prepares himself to analyze and follow—

"Hey," Margot murmurs, nudges his shoulder with hers, and Will startles. "Geez, sorry daydreamer. You're letting all the cold air in."

"Shit," Will mutters. "Sorry. Winston, come!"

No response.

Will sighs, resigned. "Winston! Breakfast!" Margot laughs as Winston barrels onto the porch with his tail wagging and tongue lolling, predictable as ever. "Figures. He's always been food motivated."

"As opposed to?"

"Play motivated." Will reaches down to pick a twig out of Winston's ruff, and scratches behind his ears.

Margot hums. “I’m play-motivated, I think.” She huffs a laugh and, too, reaches down to pat Winston. Then she turns and looks up at Will. “Which are you?”

Will blinks. Thinks. Shrugs. “Food, probably.”

Margot stares at him for a little while, then smiles. She shakes her head. “Nah. I think you’re play-motivated, too.”

“How do you figure?”

“Because,” she says, and stands up straight. She meets Will’s eyes with a small but knowing smile as she moves back into the house, and makes room for Winston to pass, and for Will to close the door. “Everyone eats. But not everyone hunts.”

“Oh no you don’t! Not that one.”

“Margot—”

“Hon, remind me to refresh your wardrobe soon. I need to assert my dominance over your sugar daddy in supplying you with nice things.”

“Margot.”

“I’m *kidding*. Did he say where he was taking you? You should have mentioned this more than ten minutes before we needed to leave, by the way.”

“He didn’t say.”

“Well, he said DC, so we’ll have to play it safe. Fortunately it’s too cold for open-toed shoes so we won’t have to worry much about dress code. God, these are all so last season, I really—wait. Did I give you this? I don’t recognize any of these.”

“Um.”

“You and I are gonna chat about you holding out on me with your good taste. Go put it on. I’ll find shoes.”

“My normal boots are fine!”

“I’ll pretend you didn’t say that.”

“I meant the leather ones, not my work boots!”

“I know what you meant. Go on, chop chop. I know I left a pair of Jimmy Choos in here somewhere.”

Will knows he rides a fine line of masculinity and femininity. No matter that he feels he falls somewhere in the middle of the two, his reputation is all up to outside perception. The routine of makeup is calming, grounding, and he likes the way it makes him feel. He enjoys the control it gives him over his appearance. But makeup is one thing, and clothing is another.

It is, he figures now, probably a good idea to wear a dress in public prior to the gala. To ensure he can handle the scrutiny of the public eye on him, and on his wardrobe.When he was known, he was accepted—at least as the strange fixture in the room, but an unchanging one. His snub of conventional gender roles was overlooked when people could predict his rebellions, but now he's unpredictable. So Will endures the stares of his classmates with a dull undercurrent of anxiety; it's not filming day, of course, and they've never seen him in a skirt outside those days, let alone anything fancier. When he dresses for filming, he is always business professional, button-down shirts or tasteful blouses and pencil skirts; sweaters and tailored slacks. There's always been a sense of uncertainty in crossing the line from passably feminine to undeniably feminine, from trading in tight pants and cardigans into stockings and dresses. Even in feminine clothing, he shies away from the hyper-femme. It's simply not his style—or hasn't been, before now.

The dress is pretty. *Classy,* Margot insisted, as she helped him into Hannibal's gray coat and tied the belt at his waist, tucked pearl hair pins into the casually refined twist she'd made of his curls. Pearls in his hair, his ears, on the accent clasp of the ankle-high boots Margot had unearthed from the abyss of his closet, pebbled black leather lined with soft, plush shearling. Will is comfortably warm, ensconced in lace leggings and wool, but won't deny the excess attention from his classmates makes his cheeks grow hot and uncomfortable. He wonders if it's because of the dress, or simply because he's surrounded by others in sweatpants and sweatshirts while looking like he walked out of *Better Homes & Gardens* magazine.

When the lecture ends, it's not a moment too soon. Will is packed and ready to bolt before they're fully dismissed; he heads for Campus Drive and tucks himself beneath a quiet alcove, keeping an eye on the drive for Hannibal's Bentley. In the meantime, he digs through his bag for his backup cell and searches out his alternate source.

<< If you still want to meet, I can make time tonight.

The return message takes a minute.

>> I was up early and I'll be working late. Tomorrow works better.

<< I'll be in DC tomorrow night with a friend.

>> I can make it to DC.

Will frowns. He's not sure he wants to interrupt his evening with Margot for the emotional toils of his source, but—

>> I’m surprised you haven’t asked about the staff meeting.

Will stares down at the screen. Hannibal hadn’t mentioned a staff meeting, which would imply it wasn’t important, but—

>> Since, you know, they were looking for you.

His blood runs cold. It has nothing to do with the winter air.

<< 9:30, Iron Horse

>> Wouldn’t miss it.

Will locks the phone and shoves it in his bag. His jaw clenches. It’s likely his source is trying to rile him—Will knows the man is developing a dependency on his support, and it’ll likely end badly. He fancies them friends instead of associates, which is more of a headache than it’s worth.

But Hannibal never mentioned a meeting of any kind. Certainly not one revolving around Will or his influence—more than likely, regarding the data breach.

Will places a hand over his mouth in silent horror. If Freddie pointed the FBI to Hannibal and the hospital, instead of to Will…

But Hannibal would have told him. Will is sure of it.

His cell buzzes in his pocket. Will scrambles for it, and with a sickening sense of relief and anxiety, sighs when he sees the familiar contact. “Hannibal,” he says breathlessly.

“What’s wrong?” is the immediate response.

Will shakes his head, huffs a sigh and shivers in the cold. Of course Hannibal can hear his nerves. But what reason does Will have to doubt him? Once Will talks to his source, clarifies his intent and sifts through his amateur word games, Will can ask whatever questions of Hannibal he needs with better information to source them from. Hannibal will answer him, and the anxiety will be pointless. Problem solved.

“Nothing,” Will says with a wry smile, “it’s just kinda cold without pants.”

Hannibal *tsks* over the line, but when he speaks, he sounds both exasperated and pleased, concern assuaged. *“You should have waited inside, stubborn thing. I’ll be there in just a moment, I’m turning onto the campus now.”*

“It was crowded, outside was easier,” Will lies mildly as he cranes his neck, searching for the sleek black town car among a sea of junkers and vehicles too old to be modern, but too young to be vintage.

When he sees the Bentley, against his better judgement or his own own ability to control otherwise, his heartbeat speeds. “I see you. I’ll be right there,” he says, and hangs up.

He barely restrains himself from jogging. Even then, it’s a near thing—he doesn’t even wait for the car to fully stop, and by the time he’s pulling the passenger door open, his chest is fit to burst. Will tosses his bag in the passenger footwell as he kneels on the seat, doesn’t hesitate at Hannibal’s sound of surprise as his cold hands find Hannibal’s cheeks and pull him into a kiss.

It’s good. It’s so good, and it’s been almost a week, and Will is only realizing just how much he’s missed this man as their tongues slide together and Will moans his relief and a car behind them honks loud enough to startle them apart.

Hannibal’s eyes are wide and dark as Will drops into the seat and pulls the passenger door closed behind them. He licks his lips to chase the taste of Will’s mouth, and his eyes narrow infinitesimally when Will starts to smile, lowers his lashes. “I had planned to pull over,” Hannibal scolds gently, and he contradicts himself by reaching for Will’s hand, twines them together on the center console and pulls back out into traffic.

Will buckles his seatbelt with his single free hand, and loses a valiant fight against his grin, wide enough to ache. “Didn’t wanna wait.” And later, he will blame it on the confidence Margot’s efforts have given him when his fingers find the belt of the jacket and tug, let it slouch around his shoulders, fall open across his chest and his lap and pool around his body. Will’s smile softens into something almost coquettish. He feels quite ridiculous and quite confident in turns when he gazes over at Hannibal and asks, “Is this pretty enough for you?”

Hannibal’s eyes leave the road—hungrily rove the emerald-green wool, the high collar and keyhole neckline, the long sleeves and teardrop-cut cuffs, the classic, high-waisted silhouette and flared skirt that bells around his calves. The journey ends on Will’s pale, exposed throat and his sharply-lined eyes. Hannibal looks as though he would happily eat Will alive, and his fingers tighten around Will’s. “You are exquisite.”

Will smiles; the sight of Hannibal driving one-handed, so casually commanding while lit up with desire makes Will warmer than the heated seats could ever hope to accomplish. Still, he luxuriates while he can—cozies up in the passenger side, turns his body toward Hannibal, and simply watches him. Feeling the weight of Will’s eyes on him, Hannibal smooths his thumb over the backs of Will’s knuckles. The sensation is a comfort and indulgence both after the long days and nights of being apart. “I don’t wear dresses out that often, or really at all,” Will admits. “I thought I should get used to it before this weekend.”

Hannibal’s eyes slide to him in a sidelong glance. His smile lifts the corners of his mouth just barely, though Will knows his pleasure is not a secret, or he wouldn’t bother to show it. “I had wondered what you might be wearing, since you insist on keeping me guessing. Would I be prying too much to at least ask the color?”

“Blue,” Will murmurs, and since he knows Hannibal is sensitive to detail, “Navy. Full-length.” His lips curve in an answering smile. “Don’t worry, I didn’t make the choice alone. I won’t show up in anything too horrible.”

Hannibal hums, considers. Gently takes his hand from Will’s to turn onto the thruway, a controlled descent down the entry ramp. “I’m sure you won’t. Though you make it sound as though I might not be aware until the event itself.”

Will winces, but doesn't fidget. He had hoped to bring it up later, hope that Hannibal wouldn't be too angry, but, "My, um, friend wants to help me get ready, and escort me there, since it's my first real *thing.* "

"The mysterious friend," Hannibal replies. His emotions are tightly controlled, but Will doesn't sense anger—maybe some annoyance, but ultimately, calm. "I'll admit that I hoped to escort you myself. But I can tell from what little I heard her speak to you that she cares for you very much, and she'll make sure you arrive without incident."

"Honestly?" Will says, and draws a glance when he huffs, "It's kind of a publicity stunt. She wants to stick it to her dad by not showing up with the family entourage. And she's kind of a fashion icon, trendsetter. She said *two gorgeous people like us showing up together will get way more attention than an old man and his grown children.*" Will smiles at that. "You'll like her, I think."

Hannibal makes an amused noise under his breath. "She sounds like quite the personality. I'm curious as to how you met. It sounds as though your friendship is long-lived."

It's not a bad attempt, Will has to admit. But of the two of them, he is the more patient fisherman. "You'll have to wait until we're together for the stories."

At least Hannibal is a good sport to Will's games. He smiles with an edge of self-deprecation, and cedes their sparring of wills. "Very well. I can tell when I'm beaten."

Will, too, smiles—lets his eyes droop to half-lidded, lazy and satisfied. "As long as you know."

Hannibal huffs a laugh that exposes the fine points of his teeth, true mirth crinkling around his eyes as he keeps his eyes on the traffic ahead. He reaches for Will's hand once more, and twines their fingers together. Draws Will's hand to his mouth, and kisses the backs of his fingers before he returns them to nestle between the seats. "I did miss this," he says. "You. Your wit."

"Me too," Will murmurs, and squeezes his hand. "I know we can't see each other every day, but I wish we could."

Hannibal opens his mouth. Closes it. "Someday, perhaps we won't be so far from one another," he says finally.

Will wonders what he meant to say, but allows himself to imagine each morning together, each evening. Each meal shared, their free time woven together, stitching Will into the empty spaces Hannibal has left in his life. Will's chest feels full, near-overflowing when he admits, "I think I'd like that."

The curve of Hannibal's lips is a soft, intimate thing. Terribly fond, as his eyes slide over to Will and drink in the sight of him. "Then, when the time is right, we'll make it so."

Will can't bring himself to say how nice that sounds. How perfect. He doesn't dare to hope for such a peaceful existence when he knows he won't be able to have it.

Traffic in DC is terrible, even for the lunch rush. Will frowns as he looks down familiar roads, the traffic backed up for blocks surrounding downtown. With a budding sense of anxiety, he puts his hand

on the passenger window, and just as quickly removes it, mindful of the grubby fingerprints he'll leave behind. "Do you think there was an accident?"

Hannibal, too, frowns. "It could be," he says. "Or it could be an event, though I didn't think I noticed anything for today."

"Hopefully not an incident at the White House," Will mutters disdainfully. "That always slows everything down for hours with Secret Service and security checkpoints."

"We might be slightly late for our reservations," Hannibal muses, but doesn't sound particularly bothered by it. "But I'm more concerned about getting you back to campus on time if this persists."

"Missing class isn't the end of the world." Will squints down the narrow avenues, flanked by classic brick buildings. "I wonder what's going on."

"I'm sure there's nothing to worry about." Hannibal makes a quiet noise of satisfaction as traffic starts moving again. "There we are."

Will is quickly distracted when they reach their destination, a parking garage beside a fine brownstone and hotel entry sign. He sends Hannibal a quizzical look as he shrugs his coat on.

"The restaurant is inside," Hannibal replies with a faint smile. "Don't worry, Will, if I had other intentions, you'd know about it."

It pulls a wry smile from Will, and he rolls his eyes. "Sounds like something someone with other intentions would say."

Hannibal grins in a bright flash of teeth. Pulls in and pulls over. "I'll have the valet park the car. Leave your bag."

Will nods and reaches into his backpack only to tuck his second phone safely into his pocket. Hannibal smiles at this before he climbs out, and Will puts the bag into the backseat. No sense in leaving it out for anyone to see, encrypted laptop or not. He hesitates at grabbing his wallet. A flash of anxiety and bewildered uncertainty overwhelms him. Hannibal had said—but had he *meant*—

Will twitches as Hannibal opens the door for him; extends an inquiring glance that's smoothed by gently exasperated understanding. He holds out his hand for Will to take. Huffs through his nose, so soft, and smiles. "Just your phone, mylimasis. And you."

Will takes his hand and is pulled to his feet, steadied by Hannibal's hands on his waist as he teeters on the heels. Will doesn't hesitate again. It's been long enough. He sinks into Hannibal's arms and tucks his face against his shoulder carefully, and absorbs the sensation of being held. Lets it sink into his bones, his soul, and nourish him.

Hannibal's palm carefully cups the nape of Will's neck, mindful of his updo, and touches his lips to Will's temple. "Hello, my darling one." Will makes a sound that is nearly a whine, quietly and unintentionally, and Hannibal's arms tighten around him. "I know," he murmurs, and his thumb brushes the side of Will's throat, his thundering pulse, and pulls a shiver from him. "I know. It's alright, Will."

Will nods. Nuzzles. Tips his head up and kisses the sharp underside of Hannibal's jaw. "Sorry," Will says softly. "I missed you. It's really good to see you."

“Never apologize, Will.” Hannibal turns into the touch of Will’s mouth and brings their lips together, a slow, gentle press that’s so tender it makes his ribs ache. “The longer we know one another, the less damning the distance will feel. You’re not the only one.”

“You never seem to have to run into *my* arms,” Will grumbles with a self-deprecating smile, growing wider as Hannibal turns and tucks Will under his arm, close to his side.

“You always beat me to it,” Hannibal replies easily. “I’m sure the day will come.”

Personally, Will doubts it. But he likes the thought enough that he doesn’t dare argue.

The restaurant is glamorous, opulent. It reminds Will of the Verger’s dining room, but much, much larger—white and bright, large glass windows and linen tablecloths and napkins, fresh flowers and sprigs of herbs in small vases on tables. The arrangements alone must cost hundreds per day, but he’s wisely learned over the years to never react to such things. It only makes it more obvious to those whom such indulgences are normal that you don’t truly belong.

The best way to blend in is for them to never know you’re out of place. They only look for oddities when they know they *should* be looking.

As such, he does not balk at menu prices, and resigns himself to the fact that if he chooses the least expensive of lunch options, Hannibal is sure to notice, and likely to retaliate by ordering *for* him. Though, in all honesty, everything *does* look delicious, and choosing for himself grants him enough of a challenge, anyway. He doesn’t miss the approving glint in Hannibal’s eye when Will takes his suggestions to heart and orders a seafood dish—locally sourced, Hannibal assures him, and sustainably farmed or caught. Hand-dived scallops have a better flavor than dredged scallops anyway, he says, and seems surprised when Will launches into an unexpected discussion about commercial fishing. Hannibal is knowledgeable enough to be passable, and asks all the right questions as Will details the difference between commercial-scale trawling and dredging, and the more selective diving and trolling. Fishing on a local scale for a community is one thing, of course. Fishing for a national supply chain is a completely different matter.

But through the discussion, Will is distracted. As it grows further into the lunch hour and the restaurant fills around them, there’s a buzz in the room. Pale faces among the well-dressed, and it’s only upon seeing the twentieth press badge pinned to a lapel by people who clearly know each other—but no one gathering together in the party dining room—that he finds his conversation dying out.

Hannibal doesn’t ask at first. His eyes find Will’s face as Will scans the room, reads the anxious energy like a serpent scenting for prey. The animated movement of Will’s hands becomes a sedate folding of fingers in his lap, clenched around a cloth napkin.

And he waits. Listens, and waits.

“Wouldn’t even let us in—”

“—working from nearby. Not sure how I’m supposed to get anything done—”

“They locked down the whole building!”

"—cops everywhere. They called in the FBI."

"Jessica from the *Times* said it was there this morning before they even opened. Not a single alarm."

"—there's no security cameras—"

"—yeah, the President is going *off.* Congress is freaking out, it's a mess—"

"—don't know why, it wasn't like he left the body in the Senate Chamber—"

"Ha, fake news my *ass.*"

"I tell you what," says the man at the table behind them to his companion, and Will hones in on the unfamiliar voice as he takes a generous drink of dark, fragrant liquor. "This is why I do stocks, not crime. If I was the *Analysis* guy right now, I'd be pretty damn glad I was anonymous."

Will doesn't hear what the man's companion says in reply.

His ears ring. His vision blurs. Hannibal's eyes snap to him, and his sharp look of concern is all Will can see as his world fizzes around the edges. "Will?"

In the back of his mind, Wilhelmina paces—a wolf and a huntress born into the same body. *Go,* she whispers. *He left us a gift. He's waiting. Go.*

Will inhales slowly through his nose.

Holds it.

Meets Hannibal's eyes.

Exhales.

"Well," he says, "it sounds like traffic will be backed up for a while. We might as well take our time."

Hannibal's gaze is inscrutable. His head tips to the side as he surveys Will with his dark eyes, his pursed lips. He looks, not at Will, but *through* Will, assessing his mental state. Combing his knowledge of Will and all his quirks to see what, exactly, he should expect. How he should respond. Will knows he's not making it easy.

It isn't easy. Goddamn it, he *wants* to give chase. It's what he's made for. What he's trained himself for.

But he can't.

"If you need to go…" Hannibal says carefully.

"Whatever's done is done," Will replies, pitched so only they may hear. It hurts to say it, so he forces a smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes. His teeth click together with the stress of it. "If you're not first, you're last. By *his* design, this time I wasn't." Will swallows. Keeps that smile on. "Now anyone else that needs my attention will have to wait their turn. You're first in line."

Hannibal stares, still and silent. Then, like a statue coming to life, he breathes and leans forward, palms flat on the table. His head is angled toward Will with a small but intimate smile; the murmur of a lover passes between his lips. "You *want* to go."

Will's stoicism shatters. His smile aches, and this time he knows it makes it to his face as he, too, leans in, nearly close enough to kiss. "I'm *dying* to go," he admits softly. "But I can't just walk onto a crime scene, and without the scene I need everything else I can get. That takes time. He can wait an hour or two for my attention." Will's eyes lower. "I've made you wait days for mine."

Hannibal hums his acknowledgement, his forgiveness. "You know, between he and I, I do still believe I'm the more fortunate." He reaches over, finds Will's hand. Curls around it, lifts it, kisses it like a gentleman, like someone who cares for Will so dearly he can hardly stand it. "He may have your thoughts, your concern, may even sometimes walk among the indistinct shapes of your dreams. These are gifts enough to draw his attention. But the best of you, Will—your mind, your wit, your touch, your company and care—you share with me. I pity him."

Will's lips part soundlessly. "You *pity* him?"

"It's a wretchedness that he likely never knew before he became aware of you. Now, I wonder if he can get it out of his mind at all."

Will doesn't understand. His eyes find the condensation that beads on the side of his water glass. He watches it drip, collecting moisture and momentum in a faster and faster descent until it meets the tablecloth, and loses substance entirely. "What do you mean?"

Hannibal squeezes Will's hand with the utmost affection and patience, and finally, he looks up. Hannibal traces the blunt edge of his thumbnail over and between Will's fingers. He smiles when Will shivers. "Being alone."

Will hesitates to say it, but remembers Hannibal's insistence from the night before. The promise that Will can speak freely. "But he's not." Huffs a breath, and doesn't meet Hannibal's eyes. "He's never been. Or—or not as long as I've been here. I've been listening. Looking. *Seeing.* " He swallows hard. "And now, if he…"

"Sees you," Hannibal says gently.

"If he sees me *back.* It means…" Will shakes his head slowly. Then again. "I don't really know what it means for me."

"He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster," Hannibal murmurs.

Will laughs helplessly. "Maybe I've looked too long into the abyss. Is it wrong that part of me is glad that he's finally looking back?"

"It's natural to want to be acknowledged," Hannibal replies. Slides his fingers to Will's wrist and dips beneath the cuffs, trails his fingertips over the wool and down the sensitive underside of Will's arm. "He wants to be seen. So, too, do you want to be seen. You have that in common." Up the outside of his arm, to Will's shoulder. Over the high collar, the barest touch at his throat. Hannibal's lashes are lowered, eyes intent on Will's mouth. "I see you, mylimasis. With time, I hope to see you better, as I hope you'll see me."

"Transparency," Will says with a strained and quiet laugh. "Sounds dangerous."

Hannibal draws him in, and Will is helpless to resist. In the moments before Hannibal takes the thoughts from Will's mind, kisses the worries from his lips, the last thing he says is, "We'll never know until we try."

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter Notes

As always, thank you so so much for all the lovely messages. Sorry this chapter came out so late tonight—Will decided to take me for a ride I wasn't expecting, so this chapter ended up at about 7.5k, which is about 2500 words more than I expected.

TWO THINGS: due to my work schedule, I'm thinking about switching to Fridays for updates, since it seems to be ending up Thursday afternoon/nights anyways. That would give me both my days off to work on my chapters as I need, and recently, I have absolutely needed. THING TWO: I am probably going to have to take a week's break on August 8th/9th so I can finish my MHBB. I just haven't had enough time, and I hate to let Headlines suffer, but a deadline's a deadline, and I need to get it done. Let me know what you think about the Friday thing, I'll take opinions into account.

Also, fair warning: there's another body in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ten Hours Earlier

Maneuvering in Washington is always a challenge. There's more surveillance, more watchful eyes of the populace, and heightened security from proximity to the White House. The closer he gets, the more careful he must be—and right now, he is very close, indeed.

Hannibal doesn't care about any of that. Aside from the inconvenience, it's inconsequential.

He is purposeful as he places the body in the grand ballroom, center stage and forward-facing—places flowers, drapes cloth. The cutting and carving is already done, it's simply the posturing and small details that remain. He sets the scene exactly as he imagined it to be, and is pleased to find the overall effect better than he'd anticipated. Savors the impending horror of those who will find what he's left with a sort of snide satisfaction, and is consumed with a terrible desire for one specific pair of eyes to see what he has made.

What Hannibal has created is a King's Gambit inviting Will to engage. It is the opening move of his endgame. It's a question and a promise. An offering. An overture.

And he has chosen the venue to suit.

When he is done, he stands back. Surveys, as he imagines Will might. Feels an abject sense of dissatisfaction that Will likely will not see this particular body in person, but there's nothing else to it. He wants to keep the game between them. It is for others to witness, not to participate in, so he must proceed with caution.

Maybe someday we'll share a hunt, and not just the kill.

Hannibal *wants*. Having Will at his side in this moment, staring down at this tableau with his secretive smile and that sharp light in his eyes, would be an incredible joy.

But if Will were here, Hannibal would not have needed to create this scene.

The point is moot. But their time will come.

In the underground garage is a nondescript silver sedan with the proper parking permits, neither new nor old, or in any notable state of disrepair. It will wait in its reserved parking spot, undisturbed, until Hannibal can come to collect it. He's left no personal belongings inside it; it will have appeared to have driven in last evening and never departed. Perhaps the driver caught a cab, or went home with a friend. Either way, when the FBI inevitably comb all the vehicles in the lot, there will be no reason to find it suspect.

No one ever expects a well-dressed or successful man to be untrustworthy; his acquaintances had let down their guard, had been all too happy to share the details of the building's comings and goings in casual conversation at the opera weeks ago. With a set of keys in his possession from a subtle and unexpected sleight of hand, Hannibal's way is clear. He locks up appropriately behind him and returns to the security box, the guard passed out cold from a well-placed dose of Rohypnol into the vat of communal coffee. Hannibal will drain the container before he leaves, but only after he carefully moves the man's face to rest on the keyboard, no longer concerned that a smash of buttons will trigger an alarm. It doesn't matter now if it does—only that it seems the man's carelessness has caused this unfortunate lapse of surveillance.

The man will be out his job in the morning for such a thoughtless mistake, falling asleep on the job in a building where White House Correspondents regularly come and go, and allowing a murderer to wander in. Hannibal cannot find it within himself to care. He's been generous enough to leave the man with his life. By all accounts, he's been kind.

Hannibal slips out of the National Press Club and into the adjacent hotel through interconnected staff doors and the shadowy corridors of the parking garage—so-very-conveniently, if not strategically, suffering a breaker failure that has accounted for little to no lighting. It's early yet; there is only a short while remaining before the restaurants in the building will begin their meal prep, and the Mariott staff begin their rounds, by which time, there will have been enough traffic in and out that Hannibal's tracks will be well-covered. His plastic suit will account for the rest.

Hannibal strips from the coverall and nondescript clothing in a dark corner, tucks it into a briefcase he'd strategically left hidden in an alcove not more than a day before. He dons the crisp white shirt and black pants that were stowed within: well-made but standard-issue, nothing particularly eye-catching when paired with a plain coat and winter hat. He cuts through the hotel, blends with bleary-eyed corporate-types in the lobby with a paper cup of dismal coffee in hand; joins the herd as they shuffle on foot toward Union Station, where he will take the red line to Bethesda. There, he will pick up the Bentley and return to Johns Hopkins for the tail-end of an on-call shift with too many doctors, in which Hannibal may sequester himself into his office and complete paperwork until he's released around lunchtime.

He is as reasonably certain of himself as he has ever been. After all, the efficacy of the FBI on television is only ever fiction. In the real world, things are much more complicated, and the public much more blind. The Ripper is an indistinct nightmare in the minds of so-called decent people. In trying to define him, they will overlook even the shape of his shadow.

And until such a time comes as they can pin him down, Hannibal will continue as he always has—doing exactly as he pleases, and nothing less.

His alibi has been cemented by a remote activation of his home security system, and a call received shortly before leaving the hospital. His keypad will show a deactivation at the time in which Hannibal was in DC—a remote deactivation, but from a burner cell not registered under his name. Hannibal puts the sim card back in his phone when he reaches Johns Hopkins, armed with chain store donuts and a box of coffee purchased just outside the hospital with his credit card. He is a regular, and they will remember him being there, if not exactly what time.

An inconvenient ordeal for poor Doctor Lecter, who has no one at home to check things over on his behalf. How very kind and considerate of him to bring something back for the nurses after a quick run-out to make sure everything was okay with his house. And in a hospital emergency department with no exterior windows, a busy place, what does time matter? He was gone for an hour, perhaps—not really sure, but surely not very long. The nurses will repeat this with a glowing recommendation of his character, and Hannibal's reputation will be protected, should an investigation come.

With the first dawnings of early morning light, in the aftermath of his most daring tableau yet, Hannibal's phone buzzes.

> >> Hope your shift is going ok. I'm really glad you called last night. Looking forward to seeing you later.

The typing cursor remains. Stops. Starts again. Patiently, Hannibal looks down at his phone with a sense of fond anticipation, and he waits.

The addition is not what he expects given the length of time Will spent typing, and yet Hannibal is far from disappointed. No—if anything, he is only more certain of what he has done, and all the things he is willing to do for Will Graham.

> >> ♥

All things said, lunch is incredibly pleasant. Will is polite, doesn't fumble with the multitude of silverware, and openly appreciates the quality of the meal. His conversational intellect is stimulating, and the classic cut of his tasteful dress leaves nothing wanting in terms of aesthetics. Hannibal sees others send him curious glances, both envy and desire from men and women alike. It's only right; Will is beautiful. If Will were anyone else, he might've preened under the attention—but Will is not anyone else. Not only does he not react, he doesn't seem to notice at all. He remains pointedly fixated on Hannibal, despite the conflicted expression Hannibal reads in his face. Will, as always, denies himself what he truly wants.

After all the effort he has put into becoming Will's sole sense of stability, Hannibal probably shouldn't have been surprised that Will would not want to leave his company—even to survey the Ripper's handiwork. Despite his flicker of annoyance, Will's logic is sensible. There is not much he can do without clearance to enter a crime scene.

So it's almost enough to know how badly Will wants to see. Almost.

Perhaps Hannibal expected something different once he and Will are alone in the car. An eagerness, maybe; for Will to dig out his phone and search with that singular, rapt attention for the details of the Ripper's latest kill.

But he doesn't.

Hannibal's hands tighten on the steering wheel as he turns into traffic, as the car creeps along the roadways, and Will does nothing more than stare down the avenues. "You're very quiet."

Will says nothing at first. Doesn't snap out of his daze until Hannibal sends him a sidelong glance, and a slow blink brings Will back to the present. "Thinking," Will murmurs.

Hannibal decides to test his luck. "About the Ripper?"

Will nods, silent.

Behind his lips, Hannibal's tongue traces his teeth. The decadence of their meal sits pleasantly in his stomach; this uncertainty, less so. "I had thought you might already go looking for details. You surprise me, Will."

Quiet. Will is even more halting and hesitant than he normally is, the dark fringe of his lashes sweeping low across his cheeks. His hands are folded in his lap, knuckles tensing as he winds his fingers together. Just shy of wringing his hands, with that same unreadable expression on his face. Voice soft and low, he does not look at Hannibal. "He didn't choose me for this one. Guess I'm supposed to wait."

Hannibal's brows draw together just slightly. He focuses on the cars ahead as they inch toward the interstate. Of course he'd wanted Will to see, but surely Will must understand how being present twice in a row would seem suspicious. Shielding Will for a second time in the aftermath of his tableau would be nigh impossible, what with the additional scrutiny due to proximity to the White House, and the tenacity of the FBI. The National Press Club is just blocks from both; a veritable taunt on the agency's front doorstep.

"We're alone now," Hannibal says, and quite reasonably, if he does say so himself. "The prying eyes you're wary of in public won't reach you here."

Will says nothing. When Hannibal looks over once more, Will's faded pink lips are pressed together as he stares down at his hands. He picks absently at a hangnail with recently-manicured fingers, a subtle, glossy sheen. How had he not noticed? He certainly does now—and Will's telling wordlessness.

It's a strange thing, jealousy. It is all the more terrible when he knows he has brought it upon himself, and has only himself to blame. Only himself to be jealous of. His own choices have brought him to a place where Will doesn't believe he can confide in him, steeped in uncertainty and fear of Hannibal's reaction as a good and gentle man. Like Hannibal isn't starving for the darkness inside Will to break free, to look into his eyes and *see.*

Hannibal, too, purses his lips. "Unless you wish to be truly alone."

"I don't know what I'm going to find," Will mumbles. "I'm…"

Scared.

Hannibal tenses his jaw. If Will could only see, he would understand. “Perhaps then it’s better to look while you’re in the company of someone who would gladly provide comfort if you should need it.”

“Hannibal, I—” Will’s voice drops to a wretched whisper. “I’m trying not to get you involved.”

Hannibal licks his lips. Feels frustration in his breast. Tries not to lose his temper. And still, he feels such terrible, pitiable affection for his young darling. So very young. Even if Hannibal were the man Will believes him to be, after all they have been through, he would surely still demand to be involved. “Do you think that’s what I want?” He asks, and carefully sharpens his words to cut, but not to kill. “To avoid involvement in your life? Is that the impression I’ve given you?”

“No,” Will answers instantly. “But—”

“I have never cared for anyone like I care for you, Will,” Hannibal says. He means it. As such, he nearly snarls when he sees Will flinch at the words. “I’ve seen you in the throes of nightmares, felt your blood on my hands. I’ve seen what proximity to this man can do to you, and I accept that, so long as I’m able to stand at your side. Is that no longer what you want?”

Will’s shoulders hunch. His chin ducks, like a stricken child. “Please don’t be mad at me,” Will whispers.

It’s nearly pitiful.

But when Hannibal steals a glance at Will, he sees the glimmer of bared teeth, hidden by loose strands of Will’s curls. A curled lip. A ferocious expression, concealed by the softness of gentle, pleading words.

Hannibal pauses. “I’m not angry, mylimasis.” He’s not—anymore. “I want to understand. You’ve shown me what you do before. Why is it only now that you’re reluctant?”

“Because Caldwell didn’t *mean* anything,” Will snaps. “But this—”

Hannibal stills. So does Will. His voice breaks. His hands curl in his lap. “—you heard what that staffer said, at the restaurant. How *the Analysis guy* should be glad to be anonymous. So…” Will takes an unsteady breath. “Something’s changed. And that means when I look, I need to be prepared for… for *whatever* I might find.”

“You take your involvement as a threat against you?”

Will makes a sound of frustration, nearly a growl. “I don’t *know.* I haven’t seen it, and he’s made sure I’ll never get to!” Will breaks into hard-edged laughter. “So much for choosing me.”

Oh.

It seems he is not the only one who is jealous.

Hannibal exhales. Narrowly avoids smiling; nearly laughs. Dear, darling Will, denying Hannibal his desire to see his mind at work, because he, too, was denied the ability to observe. He’s had just enough time to let his tentative excitement waver into self-doubt. Will is too busy licking his own wounded heart to allow himself to be vulnerable to anyone else.

“I would withhold judgement until you see what he’s left for you,” Hannibal offers gently. Lets his eyes wander to Will, and back to the road again.

This time, Will looks back. Feels his interest. His confusion. “Why?”

“Someone has caught the Ripper’s attention,” he says, the words as hypnotic and captivating to him now as they’d been on his tablet screen. They burst with truth. Will simply does not yet understand *how* true. *“Now he is waiting to see what they will do, and who they will become.”*

Will startles at the sound of his own words mirrored back to him. In Hannibal’s periphery, his jaw tenses. “I could have been wrong.”

“Do you believe you were wrong?” Hannibal asks.

Will doesn’t answer. Not at first. Then, “Does it matter?”

“It does. Because *you* care, mylimasis. I haven’t known you to jump to conclusions without seeking your evidence first. Your conclusions are *based* on evidence, are they not?” It’s a rhetorical question. Still, he sees Will tentatively nod. “What evidence do you have but the panicked murmurings of the masses? They don’t know what you know. They don’t see what you see. Where they saw a domestic terrorist, you saw an unfortunate miscalculation. When they didn’t see a man at all, *you* did. You, and no one else.”

For a time, there is silence. Hannibal twitches when cold fingers brush his wrist. Obligingly, he allows Will to pull his right hand from the steering wheel; to clutch it in his own. Hannibal can feel Will’s heartbeat in the spaces between their fingers.

Will exhales slowly. Inhales. Breathes. Hannibal times his breaths to match, until he feels Will’s heartbeat start to slow and calm.

Will curls in his seat toward Hannibal, an echo of this morning, and draws their hands even closer—nuzzles and kisses at the backs of Hannibal’s knuckles. His lips are damp. Soft. Rubbing tiny back-and-forth paths over Hannibal’s skin, feeling the cliffs and valleys of his bones against a pink and tender mouth.

Will sighs. His breath is warm. He bends his head and touches his cheek to Hannibal’s fingers. Closes his eyes in a flutter of black lashes, and whispers his despair to Hannibal’s starving ears. “Why doesn’t that scare you?”

Hannibal slowly rolls his palm over in Will’s grip, and sighs softly when Will noses against it, finds a home there. “You’ll have to be more specific, my dear.”

“Me, understanding him,” Will says. “More importantly, him seeing *me*. You’re either insane or overconfident. I just want…” Will shakes his head once. Keeps his eyes closed. Hannibal steals a long look at him when he knows Will won’t see it, and savors the confused, lost little pull between his carefully-shaped brows. “Whatever war he’s waging, I want you to survive it. That’s all I want. And even for someone who sees blood and death every day, even if you have a dark sense of humor—even if you think you can save me, Hannibal, most people would sweat over the idea that their…”

“Partner,” Hannibal suggests.

Will’s eyes don’t open; he breathes out through his nose. “Sure. That their partner gets into the heads of serial killers.”

“Killers, plural?” Hannibal asks, gently amused. “Or one in particular?”

Will purses his lips. They pucker against Hannibal's skin. "I can empathize with anybody. The Ripper's just…" A pause. "Different." A whisper of breath; a flash of blue as Will's eyes crack open and lock on his like they were already staring at each other. Like he felt Hannibal's gaze intrinsically, an extension of himself. "You're different, too."

There is no concern, no doubt in Will's gaze—only questions. Were it not for the sincerity he sees there, Hannibal might consider what Will knows, or what he thinks he knows. But there's no fear when Will looks at him. Not like there is when he talks about the Ripper, even now.

"I've never feared death," Hannibal replies, and turns his eyes on the passing cars. Feels the weight of Will's gaze on the side of his face. "I've always been aware of the transience of life. It's one of the reasons I decided to study medicine. Pain, too, is ephemeral. Life is temporary. We must find satisfaction in imperfection and the passing minutiae of each moment. You differ from moment to moment, and day to day. It's one of the many things I enjoy about you." Will nods against his palm, accepting, and Hannibal chooses his next words carefully. "To some degree, I think your killer, too, must share this philosophy. How can I fear him when I understand him? When I see what he sees? In our eyes, Will, we share a vision of you."

"Then maybe you are crazy," Will says.

Hannibal smiles. "So are you, for pursuing him. Perhaps we're all suited to one another."

Will huffs softly through his nose. Catlike, he rubs his face fully against Hannibal's hand. Kisses it. Places it on his own throat. The sight of his fingers wrapped around Will's fragile trachea is entrancing. To know that, right now, Will's life is in his hand, and that one well-placed squeeze could kill him. That Will trusts him not to. "That's a fucked up thing to say, you know. He murdered someone today."

"Yesterday. Today. Tomorrow," Hannibal murmurs breathlessly, and looks once more at Will. He sees. He *knows.* Desires. Feels the pounding of Will's blood, and longs to taste it. Consume this vibrant, beautiful thing, and swallow him whole. "Death will always be. I'm simply comforted knowing you're chasing him."

"*Chasing* is the keyword," Will replies. Presses Hannibal's palm steadily harder, so Hannibal can feel the vibrations of Will's voice against his veins, the undulations of his racing pulse. There is *something* there in Will's eyes—perhaps not on the surface, but present. A spark, somewhere deep, somewhere dark, where it is the only flash of light. Will's head tips back. He looks at Hannibal from beneath his lashes, the shape of submission, the ferocity of a challenge. Careless, in this moment, whether Hannibal's inattention on the road causes them to live or die. Will is singularly demanding and captivating. "I haven't caught him yet."

A lure implies wanting to catch, Will had said. And now he's fishing—for Hannibal's reaction, for his expectations. Waiting to see what he will say or do. To see what kind of person Hannibal believes him to be.

Well, if Will seeks to catch something, Hannibal will oblige him. What his darling pulls from beneath the depths is, of course, entirely up to Will.

Hannibal's fingers curl closed, a thick and wide collar across the expanse of Will's throat. Gently, so gently, he allows them to tighten. Just enough to feel him gasp, but no further.

Will's breath hitches. His pupils fatten.

Oh, someday soon, Hannibal will *have* him.

With sharp teeth and sharper eyes, Hannibal smiles. “You will.”

If you’re not first, you’re last.

It’s an indisputable rule about many things, but especially journalism. They who break the first story control the public’s narrative. Will learned this well, and early on. He’s known it as an intimate concept for as long as he’s chased the Ripper. He broke the first story on the in-depth psychology of Caldwell’s murder, and subsequently the first story altogether about The Hanged Man.

He’s not the first one to break the story on the Press Club murder. For the first few hours, he oscillates between resignation and fury about that fact. Confusion. A complete and total lack of understanding. Why? *Why?* If the Ripper has a message, it’s clear he knows exactly how to find Will. Why not just *say* something? *Send* something. Leave a message on his doorstep, or tucked under his pillow, beneath the windshield wiper of his car. There are so many ways. And yet—this. A test?

No. The moment Will reads about the body in a bright, bold headline, he knows. Will knows for certain exactly what he suspected in the middle of that goddamn restaurant surrounded by press correspondents; what he wished he *hadn’t* known while cocooned in the passenger seat of Hannibal’s car, fighting to protect a man who has no desire to let Will protect him.

His living room is lit like a séance—lightbulbs out, fire burning in the hearth. Winston is sprawled in front of it, body rolling with sighing snores. Will sits cross-legged on his sleeper-sofa mattress, a monolith among a sea of moth-eaten blankets. He bites back a bitter smile, and sends a silent apology to the ghost of his father that he still feels lingering in the master bedroom upstairs; it’s a place Will has never belonged, and has refused to claim for himself. He’s not like his father; he’s never been a good man, and likely never will be. Everything for Will exists in hazy shades of black and gray, interspersed with flares of fire-lit red: death and blood.

The ground floor is where he lives, feet solidly planted, with a view of his property and all its sprawling sides. He is a soldier watching warily for enemy invasion, prepared to close the bulkheads and arm himself readily at the first sign of an intruder.

But tonight, he opens his heart and walks into a separate world. This time, it’s not one that he’s borrowing. It’s one that’s been made exclusively for Will.

Hannibal was right.

This death, this destruction, this tableau—it’s all for him.

There’s an itch beneath his skin that Will can attribute to Wilhelmina’s impatience, her desire to fold herself into the Ripper’s shadow, where she has always happily belonged. She is, after all, the epitome of Will’s instincts; a coalition of his most base thoughts and gut feelings, polished and sharpened until she gleams like a knife.

Tonight, Will opens the door in his mind, and stands aside.

It starts in his chest; a full feeling that spreads swiftly outward, a tingle that makes him shudder. It's a sudden switch in his brain as she peels out from inside of him, crawls out of the prison of his skeleton and situates herself inside his skin. It's a sensation, real and true, as she emerges from the depths and settles beside him in his mind. When he opens his eyes, he knows he is not the only one looking. He can feel her purpose in his limbs, the weighty and momentous sweep of her hands as she reaches for the phone on the coverlet. Unlocks it. Goes looking. Finds.

- **Chesapeake Ripper Strikes Again: Body Mutilated and Displayed at National Press Club!** EXCLUSIVE photos from the scene. FBI's official statement.
- **National Security Embarrassment — Gruesome Murder at Press HQ** FBI, only two blocks away, says they are "not yet sure" how access was gained to one of Washington's most secure buildings.
- **A Master of Murder? DC Area Serial Killer Takes Twelfth Victim** The Chesapeake Ripper is also attributed with the massive Beltway pile-up that killed 19, injured 73.
- **Killer Courtship: Chesapeake Ripper Pays Homage to Amateur Crime Blog in Latest Deadly Display** What we know about *AbnormalAnalysis.net*, and their defense of the Chesapeake Ripper following the Beltway Bridge Murder.

They smile. He feels her pride as their lashes lower, as they find the photos, and click past the obligatory *Warning: These photos contain graphic content and may not be suitable for some users. Viewer discretion is advised.*

The world blurs at the edges as they stare. They take a slow, shaken breath. The Hanged Man swings in their mind.

The pendulum drops.

In the center of the Grand Ballroom of the National Press Club, the man kneels. The body is clothed in black from head to toe, but somehow Will knows it's not in mourning. No, this is something… else. A black veil sits atop his head, flows down the rivers of his body, pools around his knees. It covers him like a widow. Like a supplicant.

The man's hands are bare, cupped together, palm-up. In them, he offers a single branch, the very end studded with ovular, symmetrical leaves, and nestled with fruit.

Olives. An olive branch.

Will stands before the victim in silence for a stunned moment. Even in this dreamscape, he knows better than to take such an offering just yet. Knows what it would mean.

Instead, he reaches for the veil. Folds it back. Slowly clenches his teeth at the sight of eyes removed, the pale flesh of the empty sockets. Lovingly placed within each vacancy is the blossom of a blue rose.

Complexity. A struggle for attaining the unattainable. New beginnings. And—

No. *No.*

Will doesn't try to remove them. He knows the Ripper will have left the stems and thorns attached to better anchor them inside his victim's skull. Will only wonders if he was still alive when the roses were placed, but there are some things even he can't intuit from photographs.

Will scans the body's front. There is nothing more to be learned, so he lowers the veil, and watches the roses disappear behind black gossamer with his heart in his throat.

He rounds the body, and—

"Oh," he whispers.

The man's back is split open, ribs broken outward. The skin has been flayed away, leaving an open cavity behind. Lungs, stomach, liver, gall bladder, heart—all absent. With a grim note of amusement, Wilhelmina whispers in his mind that their monster will be well-fed tonight.

Will looks inside the vacant chamber and sees black.

More specifically, a black shape. Rectangular. Placed in the vacant space where the heart should be.

A cell phone.

In this realm of dreams melded with reality, Will has no need to hesitate. He reaches in with his bare hand to close around the device and carefully lift it free. It's on—and upon being picked up, the screen lights up. *Press home to unlock,* it says, so he does.

He's greeted with the sight of his own website. **Incident I-495: This Is What Happened** in bold at the top of the page. The very same article Hannibal had quoted back at him earlier.

He was right, Wilhelmina purrs. *We were right.*

Will's heart thuds quickly, painfully. His ribs ache with psychosomatic pain, an empathetic *crack* that nearly puts him, too, on his knees. Will swallows hard once, twice, and reaches to put the phone back inside, and the room is blurring around him—

Wrist-deep into the man's chest cavity, he stops.

A tether of sinew hangs like a pull-cord, arteries attached from the internal chest wall to… *something*, pushed into the lower esophagus.

The flesh is cold. Slippery. Tough with rigor mortis and old blood. Drenched to his elbows in the mirage of the man's flayed body, Will pulls it free.

The heart.

The. The fucking heart. In his throat. And—

In the clutch of Will's fist, the dead heart starts to beat.

Will's echoes it.

Synchronizes.

He opens his eyes.

Stares down at the pictures taken by panicked press correspondents—washed out with flashes, focusing on all the wrong things, but Will sees. He sees. He's seen enough to know.

Opens a new tab, and types in *The Ace of Wands.*

> *The Ace of Wands is indicative of a time in your life where you have a 'breakthrough moment' and feel very inspired and motivated about a particular idea or passion. Your eyes have been opened to a whole new world and you are now very excited about the possibilities and the opportunities that are available to you.*
>
> *You are showing huge potential at this time and are driven by a strong, creative force. It is as if there is a latent talent within that is just bursting to get out and be fully utilised. This is also a perfect time to draw upon your imagination and to make your dreams reality.*

Will gasps for breath. Clambers off the bed. Leaves Winston in front of the smoldering embers as he jams his feet into his work boots, tucks in the cuffs of his flannel pajama pants. Struggles with the sleeves of his threadbare shirt as he dons Hannibal's coat in a hurry, and feels them push up around his elbows inside. He doesn't spare a thought to the discomfort. Will shoves his keys in one pocket, his phone in the other.

His heart is choking him, pulsing thick behind his teeth as Will scrambles out into the cold, into the night. Elation and overwhelming terror as he crashes through dead brush into the field, so far out that he can barely see the nearly-faded glow through the windows of his little house.

Kneels in the dead grass, with his back to his home. Feels the stalks crunch beneath his hands as he clutches for balance. Is enveloped by the bracing cold.

An olive branch, for peace between them. His article, for understanding.

The Hanged Man, trapped in place, awaiting change. Death, a transformation. The Ace of Wands, a new beginning.

A heart removed, hollow. A heart moved, full.

The Beltway, a declaration. Suspended from an overpass on Persimmon Tree Road, a fruit that represents wisdom, and sweetens with time. The National Press Club—a nation-wide stage with which to place their work at the spotlight. *Their* work, the Ripper's, and Will's.

Look at me. Look at him. Look at us.

Look what we could be.

Blue roses, their meaning impossible. Unmistakable:

Love at first sight.

Will's eyes burn and drip. He wraps his arms around himself, clutches at his own shoulders. His chest hurts—flayed, like just another victim. But he's not, is he? The Ripper *sees* him. Wants to know him.

"Why?" Will snarls. Chokes on his own spit and snot and tears and gasps a sob. His fist impacts the frozen ground and *aches,* still not fully recovered from the break it suffered so many weeks ago. "Why *now? Why?* "

In a place where the light cannot quite reach him, Will cries. Whimpers. Clutches at the coat, the symbol of Hannibal's regard, his worry. His affection. His—

I have never cared for anyone like I care for you, Will.

The sound Will makes is wounded, not quite human.

He *has* been chosen to bear witness—but someday, watching won't be enough. The Chesapeake Ripper is a jealous god. He'll stand for no false idols. It's naive to think the Ripper doesn't know about Hannibal. More naive yet for Will to believe he'll be allowed to keep him.

Will forces himself into silence, suppresses his cries until he nearly suffocates. Rubs his own arms. Longs for a kind touch; aches for Hannibal's embrace. The warmth of him. His soothing voice. The strength of his hands. His well-meaning promises.

He has two choices.

He can accept the Ripper's offer. God, it would be so easy to set Wilhelmina free, to draw the Ripper near with a sacrifice of blood. Abscond into the darkness, into a world of apex predators, blood and teeth. Perhaps Will wouldn't even say goodbye—he could just disappear. Leave Hannibal. But leave him safe. Alive.

Or.

If anyone has a chance of taming Will with a conventional life, it's Hannibal Lecter. Will could do the sane and sensible thing. He could open himself up, search for the festering darkness inside, and cut it out. Excise the growth inside of him—that beating, pulsing second heart that sluggishly weeps blood as black as pitch. Remove it. Destroy it. Fill the absence with extravagant outings and home cooked meals, soft kisses and rough sex, and hope like hell there's enough of Will left to love Hannibal back.

But that option requires closure. No convenient catch and release for his beloved monster.

The thought of betraying the Ripper now that Will *finally* has his attention is horrifying. Almost unthinkable. But so too is the thought of betraying Hannibal and willfully leaving him lonely. Things were different when Will expected to be stolen away, to not have a choice, or an inkling of the where or when.

This new tableau is a time bomb. Though third in the Ripper's usual set of three, Will has no doubt that this body is far from the last. There will be others. Messages left just for him. Deaths that, if Will does nothing, he will be inadvertently responsible for.

Strangers, Wilhelmina whispers. *No one we know. No reason to care.*

*Until it **is** someone we know,* Will thinks, and inhales through the thick inflammation in his sinuses. *Until he gets impatient, and it's Bev or Peter or Margot or.*

Will can't complete the thought. His eyes sting and burn, and he drops his head in defeated silence. Oppressive stillness. Feels torn open at the thought of the Ripper taking out his impatience, his jealousy, his fury, on Hannibal.

He can't stand it. God, it hurts to even imagine.

Why *now?* Why did this have to happen *now,* and not—fuck, even six months ago?

Why couldn't this have happened before Hannibal?

"What am I supposed to do?" Will whispers.

He doesn't get a chance to wonder, nor the darkness a chance to answer—for at that moment, a pair of headlights turns onto Will's driveway and does not pause or stop to turn around as someone lost might do. The vehicle sounds much too large to be Margot's car, and he's not expecting her tonight, anyway. Someone is here, someone is coming, and Will is a damn mess crying alone in a field, and left his fucking front door unlocked.

Will stands and brushes off his freezing, dirty knees with his aching hands. He feels hollow, hopeless, but there is nothing else to be done. There's a decision that will have to be made, but he can't do it now, when there's a stranger to be dealt with.

Will sniffles. Exhales. Inhales smoothly again, and dashes the tears from his eyes. Thanks whatever entities may be that he's already washed his face tonight, and there's no mascara left to run down his cheeks. There is only the shapeless bun in his hair and the puffy pinkness of his swollen eyes, his old work boots and worn-out pajama pants, and the fine, warm drape of Hannibal's wool coat. He tightens the belt around him like armor.

Will turns like a wraith and stalks quietly through the brush.

The headlights turn off. A car door slams—Will squints and makes out the distant outline of a black SUV, and bares his teeth with a flicker of resentment, of fear.

Of course they would come.

But he's prepared for this.

Inhale. Exhale. Embraces calm. Pulls the bun from his hair and lets his day-worn curls fall down around his shoulders, lets his bangs soften the shape of his angular face. He's still more than a hundred feet out into the dark where the porch light doesn't reach, but he's near enough to observe the broad form of an African-American man on his porch. Suit pants, winter coat. Close-cut hair, beard and goatee. Not very old—maybe Hannibal's age, somewhere in his mid-to-late 30s.

Loud. He knocks at the front door. "Will Graham?"

Winston starts to bark, the distant echoes carrying out over the empty field and frigid stillness. Will approaches in silence, wonders whether or not he'll be heard. He isn't.

The man knocks again. Glances sidelong at Will's car parked in the driveway. "Will Graham?" he calls again. Receives no answer. Reaches for the unlocked doorknob. His free hand hovers cautiously over his hip.

Will's teeth clench. He doubts the man has a warrant; any entry would be illegal without his consent —not to mention what Winston might do to a threatening intruder, advanced age or not. Will eyes the gun on the man's hip speculatively, then steadies himself for the inevitable. He steps out of the brush and into the yard. Pitches his voice soft, but with resonance. "What are you doing here?"

The man startles. As expected, Will swiftly finds himself faced with a gun half-out of his holster. Will raises his hands in silent surrender, and does his best to look equally startled at the man's presence. To the agent's credit, he doesn't point the gun at Will, though he looks ready to. Not a rookie, then. Someone who has practice and experience with firearms. Ex-military, perhaps.

“Jesus,” the man mutters under his breath. Then he frowns. Glances at the number nailed to the front door, and back to Will. Sizes him up, takes in his ruddy cheeks, and replaces his gun in his holster, but keeps his eyes on Will like a hawk. “I’m looking for Will Graham. Does he live here?”

Ah. So it’s clear the man doesn’t recognize him. Doesn’t know who he’s coming for. So he’s here on a rumor, or precious little information. Will touches his chest, as though his heart were still about to burst from surprise and alarm. Sounds faint when he asks, “Who wants to know?”

He knows. The man frowns, but reaches to his belt to remove his credentials, and flashes his badge. “Agent Jack Crawford, FBI.”

“Isn’t it a little late for a house call, Agent Crawford?” Will strides closer, putting his hands in his pockets as he approaches. The man’s lips purse. Brow furrows. His eyes linger on Will’s concealed hands with wary suspicion, which eases when Will only removes his keys.

The agent’s forehead creases again when he looks for another car and doesn’t see one. “He may have pertinent information to a case,” he lies with practiced ease, the kind of voice that says *I’m definitely not investigating your loved one, just here for a chat.* Whether or not that’s true remains to be seen. “The car in the driveway is registered to Graham.”

Will looks over at his Volvo, boxed into the driveway. Frowns, and tilts his head. “Didn’t know the FBI followed up on—what, parking tickets?”

Crawford *harrumphs* with visible annoyance. “Look, do you know where he is?”

“Yes,” Will replies simply. He crosses his arms over his chest. Inside, Winston keeps barking. “I’m just trying to think of what *investigation* I might have pertinent information for, and other than the jackass who got arrested for assaulting me a few months ago, I’m coming up blank.”

Crawford’s brows raise. His stance changes just slightly, and Will is vindicated that he’s thrown the man even slightly off-kilter. “*You’re* Will Graham?”

Will steps up onto the porch, and Crawford side-steps him as Will raps once on the door. “Winston,” he says scoldingly, loud enough that the barking stops. “Go lie down. *Tss.*”

Winston goes. Will reaches out, puts his key in the door, and locks it. Turns, and places his back against the wood.

Crawford stares at him. He looks wryly amused, but also annoyed. “I guess I know better than to ask if I can come inside.”

Will lifts and drops one shoulder. “Winston doesn’t like strangers.” Will glances down at himself, his less-than-presentable state. “Will this take very long?”

A vein in the man’s temple pulses. “That depends on you, Mr. Graham.”

Will twitches. Can’t help it. Slowly, *slowly* curls his fingers into fists. “Just Will.”

A look of dawning comprehension. Crawford nods, just once. “My apologies. I didn’t mean to offend.”

“It’s fine.” It’s not fine. Will’s still shaken. He’s going to be up all night, no matter what he does, which is the *last* thing he should be doing when there’s only a few more days until this damn gala, but —“Am I being detained?”

Jack shakes his head once. “Just have a few questions.”

Will considers his options, then decides to cut his losses. His night’s not gonna get much worse.

No, Wilhelmina whispers. Scratches at the back of his brain with the sharp points of her fingernails. She’s drawing blood, but what’s a little more? Will’s already bleeding. *Don’t.*

Will shakes his head to clear her voice from his ears. “There’s a truck stop up the road, a 24-hour diner thing. I’m gonna get a coffee. You can follow me over there if you want.”

Crawford quirks a brow. “At ten at night?”

Will shrugs. “Your choice.” He brushes past Crawford on his way to his car. Gestures with his chin at the SUV blocking him in. “You mind?”

Standing on the top step of Will’s porch and watching him with an unreadable expression, Crawford huffs through his nose. “So it’s either get coffee or get lost, is that it?”

Will leans against his driver’s side door. “If it’s any consolation, you don’t have to get a coffee. There’s pancakes and stuff.” Pancakes sound awfully fucking good to Will right now. And when he gets home…

When he gets home, it’ll be time to patch his heart and write his analysis.

“And stuff,” Crawford echoes. Frowns at his SUV. “How do I know you’re not gonna take off?”

Will shrugs again. “I sure as hell wouldn’t have to leave my property if I didn’t want to talk to you. I’m not an idiot, *Jack.* I know my rights. I’m…” Will rolls the word around in his mouth, the strange taste of it. “*Offering.* ”

Crawford’s hand twitches at his side. He levels Will with a piercing stare, and for a cold and silent moment, they size each other up; Will feels it in his spine. He knows what Crawford sees isn’t particularly impressive, but he can use that to his advantage if he has to. Being underestimated is part and parcel to his outward presentation. Will would be a fool to let that go to waste.

Finally, Jack takes a step down. Then another. Will’s chest feels a little less tight when the man is off his porch, walking away from Will’s door and the Chesapeake Ripper files hidden inside that he knows damn well he’s not supposed to have. One small victory.

“Alright, Will,” Jack says. “We’ll do this your way.”

“Good,” Will says. “Move your car and I’ll lead.”

He climbs into his Volvo without waiting for a response. He closes the door. Buckles his seatbelt. Glances at his darkened reflection in the rearview, and huffs through his nose. His eyes still sting. He looks like a fucking mess, but at least Hannibal’s not here to see him tonight.

His heart clenches painfully at the thought.

The flash of Crawford’s headlights interrupts Will’s peripheral vision. He turns. For a long, suspended second, he swears there is a shadow in his passenger seat, and his heart kicks up to double-time, but.

But there’s no one there.

Will shudders. Gently slaps his own cheeks, squeezes his eyes shut. “Get it together,” he whispers. “Come on.”

Silence descends. Will turns on his car, watches the withdrawal of Crawford’s SUV in the rear reflection.

Don’t do this, Wilhelmina warns.

Will shifts into reverse and mutters, “No one asked you.”

Chapter End Notes

reblog on tumblr

I'm a pretty big tarot reader and I own several decks, but the site I pulled the Ace of Wands description from is here for those who are interested. I know some people find tarot-based murders to be trite and over-used, but most often when I see them in television, they completely misinterpret the cards they "represent", ie; Death being literal death, when a more vivid interpretation of death and destruction would be The Tower or, on some occasions, the Nine of Swords.

I made the decision to use these baselines and intersperse them with my own symbolism as a twofold message: one meaning to be read by the public in Headlines' canon, and the underlying meaning to be seen and interpreted by Will. Oftentimes, what the Ripper is leaving behind is something of a bastardization, or re-interpretation of what the original meaning might be. Obviously. Since there's murder involved, and all.

Anyway, TLDR, I was personally pretty pleased with myself when I came up with these victims and their presentations (and yes, there will be more). A lot of thought went into the body positions, the clothing, the locations, the accessories, since the Ripper is trying to use these specifically as a means of communication. I tried to account for every detail having meaning, and debated heavily what ideas to draw from. So... yeah. Tarot murders, kind of. But Ripper-style.

2:11

Chapter Notes

Hi all!! Thank you so much for helping this fic push past 10k hits!! It's really so crazy and exciting to me that this fic has been received so well. And in regards to that, as a reminder, I will be taking next week (8/10) off to work on my MHBB. Unless I get some unexpected streak of time (unlikely) with which to work on it during the week instead of my normal days off, I'll be back on 8/17, and by god, we'll FINALLY be getting to the Gala chapters if it's the last thing I do.

EDIT: due to unexpected circumstances, I'll be back on 8/24. So sorry for the inconvenience.

WARNING: this chapter contains the hunting and butchering of an animal (not a person) which may be upsetting to some. What can I say. Will does what he wants, and I have little ability to stop him. Read with caution.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Grimy tile, cold fluorescent light, retro diner booths—Will is far from the only one who's stopped to eat at this late hour. He is heedless of the curious stares of passing motorists and road-worn truckers. It's irritating to see their eyes linger on him, of course, but none of them are a threat. Not with the Ripper's shadow looming over him tonight. Certainly not with Jack Crawford in his company, frowning down at the generic mug of coffee like it's personally offended him.

"You know," he says in some long-suffering way, "this is better than the coffee at Headquarters."

Will shrugs. Cuts off a bite of a pancake and makes the decision to be rude; says through a mouthful of syrup, "Doesn't surprise me. Coffee's a hot commodity in places like this. Trucking is a hard job."

Crawford's frown deepens. He watches Will with a quiet, understated intelligence that Will can see he is trying to downplay and conceal. Jack sounds far too friendly when he asks, "Sure is." Eyes Will speculatively. "Where are you from?"

Will scoffs. Chews, and swallows. Leans back in the diner booth, and stares at Jack Crawford balefully. He didn't get pulled from his property in the middle of the night to talk about his raising. "If you didn't do your research on me, that's your problem," Will answers. "I'm not here to chit-chat, Agent Crawford. Ask me what you want to ask, or I'm going home."

The false friendliness fades. Crawford folds his hands on the tabletop. To his credit, he doesn't seem to care that his expensive coat is touching the grimy table. Will has no patience for the rich and powerful who consider themselves above the daily ins-and-outs of the average man, truck stop diners included. It's one of the many things he also likes about Margot.

Then Crawford leans forward, and Will's wary respect turns into wariness of another sort. "You were born outside New Orleans, and moved around the state for most of your life. Homeschooled. Bright kid, no siblings, blue-collar dad. Graduated early. You were a junior on track for early college

graduation before you moved away—changed majors, lost everything but your gen-ed courses, and got bumped back down to sophomore with your admission to UMD. How am I doing so far?"

Will's lips press together. He sets his fork down. So it's gonna be like that—Jack asks him questions to see how Will answers, to gauge his character, when he knows the answers himself. Will's already got one strike against him.

And it's clear that Crawford knows his history. Will must tread carefully.

Jack's eyes are piercing. Meeting them sets Will's teeth on edge, but he does in a flicker, there and down again. Offers a tight, closed-mouthed smile. "Anything else?"

Jack's smile slowly widens. It's not cruel-natured, but it's certainly confident and self-assured. "I think that's a good place to start. Why don't we make our lives a whole lot easier and be honest with one another?"

Will reaches for his coffee. Pulls it closer, but doesn't pick it up. "Honesty can get people in trouble."

Jack's eyebrows lift. His smile remains, perfectly placid. "I have no interest in getting you in trouble."

"And if you wanted to give me that in writing, I might believe it," Will counters. Narrows his eyes, and takes a sip as Jack's eyes narrow on him in return. "Look, Agent Crawford, if you know where I come from, then *you* know that *I* know how this works. You came to my house in the middle of the night to catch me off guard, but you didn't have a warrant. You have suspicions about me, but no proof. You hoped I would do the polite thing and invite you inside so you could interrogate me, and in the comfort of my home, I might relax and let something slip. That, or you'd see something to justify probable cause for a warrant in the future. I've given you neither. It's not that you have no interest in getting me in trouble. If you had a way to use it to your advantage, I'm sure you would. But you don't."

There's frustration in Crawford's eyes, but his smile widens. "Have you ever thought about applying to the FBI, Will?"

Will replies with a tight, cold smile of his own. "I'm not old enough. Among other things."

Their stare-down is silent, accompanied by the tinny sound of an oldies radio station playing throughout the store, the sound of forks and knives clinking against chipped plates, the dull drone of the kitchen employees somewhere behind them, out of sight.

Jack Crawford sighs through his nose, slowly but surely. Will reaches for his fork and resumes eating. He tries not to think too hard about the strip of bacon he crunches between his teeth.

"This murder today," Jack says, as though he expects Will to be familiar with it, "and the website involved in it. I find it awfully suspicious."

Will says nothing. Glances down to spare a look at his pancakes, and holds Jack's eyes as he takes another bite. Jack presses his lips together into a thin line.

"I think they're in it together, personally."

Will stops chewing.

Jack's eyes are bright. Confident. Will carefully finishes chewing and swallows hard. Puts down his fork and knife on his plate, and suddenly does not feel hungry. The memory of the last several weeks,

dread and fear mashed into terror, sleepless nights thick with worry—they blend together into one acrid taste on the back of his tongue. It runs over his teeth to instinctively chase a taste of sweetness, but finds it gone.

“That seems like a hasty assumption, Jack,” Will says softly. Grimaces, as he pulls his eyes away from Jack Crawford.

But Jack pushes onward. “You don’t think they’ve emboldened each other? They’re escalating. More fame, more attention—”

Will’s lip curls with disdain. “I think you fundamentally misunderstand the concept of anonymity.”

The clever glint in Jack’s gaze is razor-focused on Will. “Is that so?”

Will’s tongue presses against the back of his teeth until it hurts. Until he can feel the impressions in his flesh. He swallows back the creeping wonder at the Ripper’s attention. The intrigue. The appreciation for art made of blood. He closes his eyes and remembers the less-nice feelings, the loneliness. What it is to be isolated, worried sick, and to be the only one who sees the signs.

He remembers being scared. And he allows himself to look like it.

“Agent Crawford,” Will says, and opens his eyes. His shoulders roll inward to make himself small, meek. “I’ll posit a hypothetical situation to you. And you can tell me your thoughts.”

For a moment, Jack says nothing. Takes in the adjusted set of Will’s frame with suspicion, but nods once.

Will inhales the chemical scent of diner syrup, nearly-burned bacon. Grease. The distant tinge of diesel that invades through the automatic sliding doors. Rubber. Engine oil.

Will remembers blood and fire; screams echo inside his skull, and he shivers. Pulls Hannibal’s coat closer around him. Enfolds himself in vulnerability. “Imagine that you noticed something that no one else seemed to notice. Three murders over the span of a month. It’s slow, the first time. They’re elaborate. Nothing like one another. Not in the same place, but you see them all, and you realize there’s a certain workmanship behind them. A certain pathology. So you set up an anonymous blog to air your thoughts, and to put together what little evidence you have. It acts like a diary. Forensics without forensics. Information gathering and guesswork, and you’re good at it—taking what you see and writing it down. And after realizing the world is cruel, that you’re not welcome anywhere you want to be, because of how you are, you decide to take ownership of your talent for yourself. For the first time ever, you let it be a part of you.”

Jack laces his fingers together on the tabletop. He tilts his head just slightly, listening intently, but with suspicion. Watching Will for cues. What does he expect to see?

“Months later, there’s more murders. You start drawing conclusions and assembling them. Patching together potential motivations from the evidence. You spend hours thinking about how he could have done it, and you come up with theories. Assumptions. But no one else is paying attention. No one else is talking about this guy, and you realize you’re the only one who sees him. You realize this could get dangerous. You go further than just being anonymous. Now you hide your tracks, and go back to hide the rest. It’s still a hobby at this point. But then you lose the only person you have that ties you to a normal life. Your hobby becomes a lifeline to sanity.”

Jack’s brows pull together. Will charges on.

“Nothing makes sense. But the murders are starting to make sense, in their own way. So you pay attention to them, and you compile what amounts to be a database. It’s still all personal at this point. No one really stops by the site. You get a few views now and again, but this killer is as anonymous as you are. His kills are only just starting to be linked, since the geographical location is so large. Different jurisdictions. But now he’s gaining attention, or starting to, before he disappears again.”

Will pushes his plate forward. He’s not hungry anymore. Two and a half of his three strips of bacon sit uneaten. The taste of it is cloying and thick in his mouth. Meat. Sinew. Salt. “Imagine he starts again. You scramble for evidence, to collect clues. He’s getting bolder, and closer, and you’re getting better at following him. Seeing him, and understanding his motivations. This time, you get there faster than you have before. You’re able to put together something comprehensive and thorough. And he must have seen it somehow, because he…”

Will stops. Raises his eyes to Jack’s. “Imagine, one day on your morning commute, there’s an accident. And you get out of your car to see what’s going on, and you see a body. For the first time, you see a scene he left, and you see it in person. In context. It makes sense, maybe more than all the other ones did. But below…”

“Is chaos,” Jack answers.

Will nods. “But you know, you *know* , that’s not what he does. The accident is an accident, but everyone is calling him a domestic terrorist. He’s a murderer, and a serial killer, but he’s not *that.* ” Will frowns at the absurdity of it. “This is a highly sophisticated offender who bases all his displays on aesthetics and underlying symbolism. If he was going to make a statement like this, it wouldn’t have been so random. So you go online, and you *say* that, same as you always have. But this time, people notice you. And you start getting death threats. You start getting pretty damn glad you’ve been covering your tracks. And then…”

Will laughs once. It’s a hard sound. It echoes off fractured ceramic and chipped tile.

“And then,” Will says, “one day, you’re minding your own goddamn business, and you find out a murderer put a cell phone with *your article* inside a murder victim where the heart should be. You are suddenly faced with the realization that he sees you. He’s seen what you’ve written, and he likes it—this *thing* that started as a personal blog and maybe *half* a potential thesis about social media’s effect on crime. How the hell would you feel, Agent Crawford?” Will smiles, a tight upward curve of his lips that is not at all humored. Not at all amused. Pained, maybe. “Hypothetically?”

For a moment, Jack says nothing at all. He seems to consider the new information he has been given, the context of Will’s hypothetical-or-not confessions. In a strange way, Will feels defeated. Hollowed out. Caught in a situation he has no desire to be in, giving only half-truths about his motivations to escape scrutiny, and it…

It feels like a betrayal. It feels like a fist clenched around Will’s heart. And part of him hopes the Ripper is watching him right now, seeing this, and that Will won’t have to live with this deception for long.

Because when the Ripper finds out—

Will looks down. His eyes are still stinging from earlier. The fine wool of Hannibal’s coat is slightly blurry in his vision, but it still feels the same on his body, and it keeps Will grounded.

He’s doing this for Hannibal.

Selfish, Wilhelmina snarls.

Yes. He is, and he always has been.

“If you don’t know him,” Jack says slowly, “How did you get your intel?”

“The usual way,” Will says. Looks up, and sees Jack’s nostrils flare with agitation. “I can’t betray my sources. But any of the information I have on his mindset just came from the evidence.” Will shrugs, helpless. “I see what I see. It’s just something I’ve always been able to do.”

Jack frowns, thoughtful. “You can observe anyone in this way?”

“You’re ex-military,” Will replies. His eyes scan Jack up and down, put together pieces of observations. Wedding ring. Nice clothes, but showing signs of wear. Solid nail beds. A little extra weight around the middle, but not much. “Married to a strong woman with a successful job. You’re a social couple; you go out together when you’re home. Good food, good drinks, but you grew up poor—nothing you’re wearing is new, but you have the money to replace it. You take good care of your stuff, you make it last. In the FBI, you’re a brain guy. You don’t do much running and shooting; you analyze behavior.” Will’s brow furrows, and Jack’s draw together. “No kids. You get frustrated when someone challenges your authority. You have good instincts, but you’re impulsive. You read people well, but you make snap decisions, and you’re stubborn when you’re wrong. I bet your boss told you that if you toe the company line, you could head your department one day.”

Jack’s expression gives nothing away. “And if you’re wrong?”

Will’s hands fold in his lap. Tighten into fists. He meets Jack Crawford’s eyes head-on, despite the unsettling sensation of being exposed. “Am I?”

He’s not. He knows he’s not. And when Jack shakes his head, Will exhales in a shuddering sigh, clenches his fists so hard his knuckles pop.

He ducks his head. Starts to laugh, and feels crazy as it builds inside him. Frantic worry. Fear. Crushing sorrow. If it weren’t for Hannibal, Will would submit himself to Wilhelmina’s fury gladly. He would give himself to the Ripper to do with as he pleases, allow himself to be cut open whichever way his monster might desire—to keep and consume whatever he’d like.

In another world, maybe the Ripper could have kept *all* of Will.

But not in this one.

“I know what you want. I know what you need. I know why you came to my door, and what you’re looking for. On the record, I will neither confirm nor deny what I know, or what I’ve done. But you need the Ripper caught, and I—” Will chokes on his breath. For a moment, he cannot breathe at all. “I’ll help you.”

No, because in this world, Will has betrayed him. Is in the process of doing just that.

“I have demands,” Will says softly.

“Say them.”

Will’s throat is thick. He nods once. Centers himself, but still feels off-kilter. Still slightly to the left, a compass off its pole. “One, I want immunity. No charges for impeding an investigation, data

violations, nothing. I'm not going to jail." Will doesn't have to imagine what would happen to him if he were to be incarcerated. He'd choose death by the Ripper's hand every time over the alternative.

Jack inclines his head. Obviously, this seems reasonable to him. Good.

"Two," Will says, and Jack's brows raise. "I need access. I'm missing critical information that could inform what I know. Everything is relevant. Everything has meaning. Whatever you have. Everything you have. I need all of it."

"Done," Jack says with a nod.

"Three." Here, Will's heartbeat starts to quicken with dread and regret. "You contact me as little as possible. After tonight, you never come to my house again. If you need me at a scene, you text a burner and assure a concealed entrance. If you see me in public, we're strangers." Jack frowns. Will laughs once, a hysterical giggle. "If I survive through the night, Jack, it'll be a miracle. You think he doesn't know who runs that website?"

Will's eyes burn. He levels Jack with a tremulous smile, and sees his hesitation, his alarm at the very prospect. "We can protect—"

"You can't protect me. There's a chance, a *chance,* that he's not aware of what's happening right now. And it'll be because he has somewhere he needs to be to maintain appearances, and because he's waiting for the notification that another article has been posted." Will rubs a hand over his face, sighs softly into his fingers. His chest flutters at the thought, excitement and sorrow. "You should know something."

Jack leans forward. His coffee is forgotten. He's been hunting Will's monster for a while now. He has the scent, and now a lead to follow. He's desperate for the scent of blood, and stares expectantly at Will to give it to him.

Will is to be the FBI's resident expert on The Chesapeake Ripper. The thought is absurd, and equally pleasing. Equally gut-wrenching.

Will smooths his fingers through his bangs, pushes them away from his eyes. Will has no desire to share this secret. It isn't *for* anyone else. But he'll have to use it to his advantage, won't he? Have to use it to inform his own movements, his decisions going forward. Use himself as a lure.

Will touches the base of his throat. He imagines the Ripper's hand there, but he can only remember the feeling of Hannibal's. "He thinks he's in love with me."

This startles Jack; he blinks rapidly as the information sets into place, as he perceives Will in a new light, with both wariness and pity. "Well." Jack clearly doesn't know what else to say. "That's."

"I know." Will inhales. Exhales. Bites the inside of his cheek until he bleeds, then licks the blood from his teeth. "I'm going to allow him to court me."

Jack's jaw clenches. "And in the meantime, more people will die."

"More people were always gonna die," Will replies, and pins Jack in place with a quelling look. "There's no other way."

Fingernails tap irritably on the table's surface. "I could bring you into custody. Enrage him, and draw him out."

“You want to talk about more bodies,” Will scoffs. His heart pounds. “It’ll be more effective if he thinks I’m attached. If he thinks I’m loyal. Until now, I’ve been an observer from the outside. I’ve never gotten personally involved. If you took me in now, he’d have no guarantee of how I’d react if he were to try to assist me. But if he thinks I’m receptive…”

Will has never felt more like a traitor than he does in this moment. Jack merely looks thoughtful. Concerned, but thoughtful.

“Let me do this,” Will says. “I’m the best shot you have.”

Jack’s gaze is sharp, calculating, shrewd. He taps one finger against his lip in consideration, but then —“Let me ask you something, Will,” Jack says. “Why now? All this time of sitting on the sidelines, you must have known there was a possibility he’d notice you and what you were doing. You’re a smart kid. What is it that’s changed your mind?”

Will opens his mouth. Closes it in silence. Crosses one arm over his chest, right hand curling in the left lapel of Hannibal’s coat, anchored over his heart. It seems the first time that Jack notices the disparity in how Will is dressed. Takes in the well-made garment that’s just slightly too large for him, and Will’s attachment to it. An attachment that is eclipsed by the affection he feels for the man who gave it to him.

“I met someone,” Will murmurs. He looks up. Meets Jack’s eyes, and tries to smile, and isn’t sure if he really manages it at first. But as he starts talking, he feels it grow. Feels it build inside him, light him up from inside. “He’s everything I thought I’d never get to have. He looks after me. Takes care of me. He makes me feel…”

Everything. Everything, all at once.

But Jack’s eyes soften with understanding. A little more of that doubt melts away. “Loved,” he offers. “You fell in love, and now you have someone you want to keep safe.”

“I—” Will’s voice dies. He hangs in a suspended moment, mid-sentence, mouth open.

Jack stares at him curiously. His head tips to the side, and the movement is so oddly reminiscent of Hannibal that Will suddenly can’t breathe at all. “Are you okay?” he asks.

Is he? Will’s really not sure. Between Wilhelmina’s restless, furious pacing in the back of his mind, between Will’s fears and newborn hopes, he feels frozen in place. Pinned underneath the weight of Jack Crawford’s careless, offhand words that lay a simple explanation to the pain Will feels, and the doubt.

“I’m in love with him,” Will says dumbly.

Jack starts to smile. Just a little, the very corners of his lips, though his expression is still twisted with amused confusion.

Will sits back against the booth. Just sits, and processes.

There’s no denying it anymore. He’s no longer falling—he’s hit the ground and broken open for the world to see.

He’s in love with Hannibal.

The feeling is complicated. Fierce protectiveness, and the longing to be seen, to be touched. The desire to run home and lock himself in his little house with his tail tucked between his legs. The desire to get into his car and *drive*, to go to Hannibal right now without asking permission, and turn up on his doorstep at some ridiculous hour. Happiness. The *desire* for happiness. The sudden, crushing fear of losing the thing he holds most dear, amplified and reflected twofold.

What follows is devastation, pure and simple.

See? Wilhelmina whispers, betrayed and trapped inside this mind and body that they share, neither wholly independent, nor a figment of imagination. *See?*

If this is what the Ripper feels—

He doesn't know me, Will hisses, a wounded predator on the defensive, desperately clinging to the sheep's wool he wears.

Wilhelmina's fury is unavoidable. *Don't lie to yourself.*

He cannot attest to whether or not she's right about that. Will only knows what he feels for Hannibal and for the Ripper both:

Everything, all at once.

God, please, no—

Will rubs a shaky hand over his face. His heart pounds in his throat. "I, um. I need to go home."

Jack Crawford sits across from him, unknowing of the conflict that rages in Will's chest. "Yeah, that's how I felt, too," he replies with a sympathetic smile. It darkens into worry. "Are you sure you'll be okay? What you said—"

Will waves him off, nauseated, impatient. "Look, Jack, I appreciate it and all, but I'm still alive so far. I'll be fine." Will breathes out slowly. "I need to think. Here." Will snags a napkin and scrawls across it with a ballpoint pen used for signing receipts, tucked inside the basket that holds packets of artificial sweetener. He writes the number for his backup cell. "Text. Don't call."

Jack takes the napkin. He frowns as he tucks it into his pocket, and then looks back at Will, but Will is already sliding out of the booth, food unfinished.

"I want a digital copy of that contract by tomorrow," Will mutters. "Immunity or no deal, Jack. I can either tell you what I know or you can keep chasing ghosts, and mine will be one of them." Will swallows. "Wait five minutes before you leave."

Will heads to the register without saying goodbye, pays his bill, and heads out into the night.

He wonders what kind of person would neglect a good man in favor of a serial killer.

Wonders what kind of person is capable of being in love with both.

When it's done, Will takes his knife and rifle and heads out into the woods. He elects to be stupid. Leaves his phone on his bed. Takes only his house key and a plastic bag in case he should be fortunate in his search. He hangs up Hannibal's coat and puts it in the closet. He replaces it with a reflective vest and camo-print outerwear, snug wool socks and his work boots. Puts his hair up tight, and pulls a hat over it. When he catches his reflection in the hallway mirror, he looks like his father's son.

I heard about the murder today before I saw anything about it. I knew I was involved. I didn't know how.

It's nearly pitch-black, overcast. The hours of the night are small. Dawn is still a ways off. But Will doesn't care.

What I saw was more than I could immediately quantify, or qualify. I had to think about it for a while. But I can't stay silent about it anymore.

He treks through the trees and the brush with only the sound of his breath as company. Further and further into the woods, until his house is long out of sight. The blackness envelops him.

I know you're waiting to hear what I have to say.

Will heads toward the stream, the water which is cold enough to kill, but not yet cold enough to freeze. It takes extended frigid weather to cause moving water to ice over. It's been cold, of course, but it's not yet the heart of winter. Will can use the sound of the brook to his advantage.

It's less with expectation, but rather anticipation that I saw what you had to show me. Heard what you had to tell me, in the form of blood and flesh. Sculpted symbolism.

The trees around him are marked with the telltale signs of antler scrapings, bark peeled away. There's a particular scent to the area markings that he recalls like a long-forgotten memory, shoulder-to-shoulder with his father on mornings such as this. In a way, it's fortunate that he's now alone with his thoughts. Will finds dead brush that still clings to its leaves, wide enough to cover a single man. He lowers himself down onto his belly without hesitation.

I'm not sure how I found myself in this place that I'm standing. I'm not sure how I found myself separated from my own life. I'm not sure what to do about it.

When the sun starts to rise, it's not with any great beauty. It's with a dull gray glow that makes everything look like squinting through a cotton blindfold, impermanent and indistinct.

But I know that you are standing behind me.

He waits. Waits and waits, and listens. Not sure whether he expects to hear hooves among the fallen leaves… or footsteps.

I can't pretend to know what you're thinking. I'm trying to see it and make sense of it. I think I understand. I'm not sure if I do.

When the stag comes, he's been lying on the frozen ground for so long that he barely realizes he's breathing anymore. The fog of his breath has long faded with the chill of his lungs. His fingers are stiff around the rifle. He feels half-dead. Maybe he is.

I won't lie to you. I am scared of what this might mean.

Slowly, so slowly, Will adjusts the rifle against his shoulder. Despite his caution, the stag still hears. Their eyes lock. Will's heartbeat thrums in his ears, but his hands are steady.

I'm scared I might be wrong.

The stag turns to flee. Will takes aim at his heart.

I'm scared I might be right.

Fires.

There is something visceral about hoisting a body to be processed. It feels instinctual. Somehow forbidden. It's not even dissimilar in size to his own, and maybe that makes it feel more real. Will works swiftly in the morning light as he hauls the deer up by its rear legs, suspended by achilles tendon and fibula on a jury-rigged deer hoist: nothing better than a stick and a rope.

He stands back. Muscle memory informs him what is yet to be done. He stands before his kill in silent contemplation. Will strips off the heavy camouflage hunting coat. Beneath it, his skin burns with exertion. His body radiates sweat and steam in the cold. In some strange and quiet way that he cannot define, it makes him feel powerful. Unafraid.

He doesn't mean to do it—

—the pendulum drops.

It is with cold, clinical efficiency that Will opens his eyes. He's not even sure when they closed. The exhaustion he feels no longer matters. There is only purpose as he extracts the knife from his ankle holster.

He wonders what it would feel like to do this to a person. If the glazed and glassy eyes of the stag were replaced with a shade of blue or green, and the flesh he slices away were furless. He supposes it must not be so different, aside from distribution of meat on the body. The overall joints and musculature would come apart much the same.

Will slices the stag's throat. Blood pours into the dirt as he travels the circumference of the neck and peels away cartilage. For a while, he stares blankly at the vertebrae that hold head to shoulders. Usually he'd have a saw for this.

I'll help you.

Today, he doesn't need one.

Will slips the knife between the bones to slice the vertebral ligaments, several small, precise cuts. His hands close around the exposed spinal column and— *crack* . It's not his preferred method, but it'll do. Will sets the stag's head aside to be dealt with later, and allows the carcass to drain.

From there, it's business as usual, and Will readies to gut the thing. Around the colon to separate it from the hide, then through the abdominal flesh. It feels as though another hand guides Will's as he tilts the blade up and slips through skin. Opens the cavity. Slices through the diaphragm to release it from the inside of the ribs. The stench of the innards is immense, but Will doesn't wince; gravity guides them out the incision he's made, suspended by the windpipe. Will reaches inside to cut it free, and lifts out the gut sack in one fell swoop.

Here, he pauses, and is partially startled out of his reverie—would the Ripper consider this a waste? Maybe he would. But it's been years since Will has eaten venison offal, and he's not sure if he's ever processed it himself. Not sure if he wants to start now.

There will be other times.

Will bags the guts to be disposed of at home. Removes his gloves. Dons his coat. Slings the rifle over his back. Grabs the head by one antler and picks it up, a trophy of his conquest. He'll have to walk back to his barn to get the old four-wheeler. He can only hopes it starts, otherwise it's only a matter of a few hours until the coyotes will find the meat, and Will can hardly carry it home himself. At least the carcass will stay cold while he's gone.

Will turns. Stops.

In the gray haze of the morning, the field-dressed stag sways gently on its tether. There is no sound in the small clearing but for the sound of Will's breath. He feels…

Better.

Yeah. A little bit better. And for a moment, the wild heart inside him is quiet.

"Nothing to say?" he murmurs sardonically to himself. Of course, he's not surprised when no one answers. Not lonely, no.

It's only later, when he stares down at the processed meat in his freezer, that he realizes just how little one animal produces once the inedible parts are cleared away. It makes him almost regret disposing of the organs. The stag's meat will likely keep him a week, maybe two, depending on how Will distributes his meals. It's not as long as it seems.

The realization is followed by a second one.

If Will assumes the Ripper is eating his victims, not as an infrequent event, but as a dietary staple, then he's killing more people than he's displaying. A lot more.

More disappeared bodies means more potential crime scenes. More crime scenes, more evidence.

He should tell Jack.

He should tell *anyone.*

*It's not **for** them,* Wilhelmina whispers.

Will closes the freezer.

He still doesn't feel right. That's the excuse Will gives himself for why he doesn't return the two missed calls Hannibal left on his phone. It's not shame for what he's done. It's not fear of what he'll find.

Will doesn't go to class. Begs out with an email claiming victimization to the campus stomach bug, and attaches his assignments and his apologies. He doesn't spare guilt to the *get well soon* wishes that his instructors reply with.

He rinses the sweat from his body and hair, but little else. He sleeps. Doesn't dream. But when he wakes, he still feels… on edge.

Clears the notifications from the missed text messages and email comments, and gets dressed as evening falls. All black, tonight—his chunky leather boots, black pants, a soft black tee shirt. Will scrubs his fingers over his jaw and knows he should shave, but doesn't want to let anything sharp so close to his skin when he feels this edgy.

There's tension in his body, his shoulders, his back. In his thoughts. He feels restless, though he's well-rested. Will huffs and pulls his hair into a bun, pins his bangs back; doesn't belt Hannibal's jacket quite as tight as he normally would. Slips his wallet into his pocket, and foregoes his bag and—

He's neither the version of himself that echoes Wilhelmina and Margot, nor the version of himself who'd be recognized on the bayou docks as Beau Graham's boy. He's someone else tonight. Rough-polished and well dressed, with something prowling beneath his skin. Cheeks without contour, eyes without liner. He's nearly surprised to find, as he slips his wire-framed glasses onto his face, that he doesn't need the makeup for the light to strike him favorably.

He's…

"Hot," Margot crows as she playfully slaps his shoulder, arm-in-arm as they walk the streets of Washington. She's beautiful tonight in a red wool coat, flared around her hips like a skirt. It's not dissimilar from the statement gown she's just chosen. Some distant part of Will is almost envious of her perfectly-straightened sheet of hair and her willowy figure. Fortunately, he's not that iteration of himself tonight. "You look hot!"

"Margot," Will sighs.

"Don't give me that. The sales girl in there barely let you come into the dressing room and tell me how I looked because she thought I was going to jump you."

Will's smile is small but indulgent. "Until you hit on her."

Margot nods, perfectly proud, perfectly shameless. "Until I hit on her. But she stopped glaring at you, didn't she?"

Will fondly shakes his head. He is hyper-aware of his location, of the people that pass them. Of the distance between them and Margot's car. Of where he needs to be going if he's going to make it on time. "Are you happy with what you got?"

"Yeah, definitely."

“You should really stop putting off your shopping for events until the week of,” Will chides her gently.

She shrugs. It’s never come back to bite her in the ass before. Will suspects she won’t learn until it does; god forbid she show up to an event in last-season clothing. He smiles privately at the thought of her skipping an event, rolling up to his house in her Lexus for an evening of drinking and playing cards instead of wining and dining with social elites. How she’d sniff offhand that she didn’t want to go anyway. But she’d learn after that, and she’d never make the mistake twice.

Will smiles a little more. What kind of friend would he be to deprive her of a future life lesson?

“All’s well that ends well,” she says with a smile, and needles him in the side. Will chuffs out a laugh. “Speaking of which, you useless UHaul—you’ve barely even mentioned your doctor tonight.”

Will’s smile fades slightly. The epiphany of love and horror are still rolled together in his mind. His want, his desire, his fears. The Ripper’s looming shadow, and the comforting weight of that darkness settled around Will’s body like a cloak. Like Hannibal’s coat.

Will tucks his hands in his pockets and tries to smile. “There’s not much to say. It’s going well. He decided to be a good sport, and we’re gonna meet up there on Saturday night.”

This seems to satisfy Margot. Getting her way always does. “And we’re going to meet beforehand and get ready—”

“At the hotel where they’re throwing the after-party.”

“Awesome, you’re learning.”

They stop in front of the high-end parking garage. Margot wheels herself around in front of him and draws him close for a hug. Will clings to her, her soft warmth. She’s safe. Comfortable. And her manicured nails against the back of his neck feel nice.

“Hey,” she murmurs against his shoulder, “if the dress thing is making you nervous, or if you’re feeling like switching, I’m sure there’s still time to get you a tux. You only have to tell me.”

Fondness squeezes at Will’s heart with weak fingers, a distant sensation inside him that is shifted slightly off-kilter in lieu of his emotional state, but present all the same. He shakes his head with a wry smile. “I like the dress. I just didn’t feel like putting makeup on tonight.”

“Or shaving, obviously,” she says, and scritches her fingers against the starts of Will’s jaw stubble. It tickles, and he snorts; ducks away from her grip.

Margot grins and pulls the Lexus keys from her pocket. The attendant in the front office of the garage eyes them both, ready to direct them wherever needed. It’s almost odd that the girl looks confused when Will backs away, more than an arm’s length between them, and performatively lifts his Volvo keys into his palm. Shakes them at Margot in a friendly goodbye that she echoes with a jingle. “Saturday?”

Margot wiggles her eyebrows and gives an aborted miniature fist-pump. “Night after tomorrow, hon! Get excited!”

Will huffs through his nose. Offers her a private smile. “I’m excited, don’t worry. I’ll see you. Drive safe.”

“Okay, Gloomy Gus, you too. Get some rest and stuff. And keep practicing your waltzing, you’re seriously getting good.”

Will huffs to himself in amusement. Waves one last time. “Good*night,* Margot.”

They depart. Will watches protectively until she disappears into the lit garage with her keys, headed toward the elevator that will safely carry her to her car, supervised by security staff. Nothing but the best for the Verger heiress, but Will would have it no other way. It’s a comfort to him, knowing what he knows about killers, that she is made safest by the spotlight she puts herself in.

Will, however, wanders away from the light.

It’s not more than a few blocks to the bar where he agreed to meet his source—and for once, Will is glad he’s left the makeup and feminine clothing behind. Aside from his boots, which could easily be overlooked as riding boots, the biker bar is not the sort of place where he wants to stand out, but exactly the sort of locale that will be loud enough they won’t be overheard. His fake ID, one of several, will suit him especially well tonight. He rarely gets second glances when he presents himself as his designated gender, man-bun or not.

Life’s a bitch that way, it seems.

It’s not a bad night for a walk, overall. There’s something about the city that Will enjoys—a dark canvas and bright lights, like wading through the stars up-close. He likes the quiet, his little house in the wilds, but there’s an appeal to urban living that he can appreciate.

Cars pass. All sorts, from high-end vehicles (as expected so close to the Capitol) to tired work vans, all clamoring toward the same places, but none of them moving quickly. Will watches with bland, mild interest as they pass him; approaches an intersection and finds himself in a crowd of young people leaving a bar, all packed together and waiting for the light to flash. The proximity makes him itch; Will takes a deep breath and lifts his eyes away from the people around him, searches out the road across, and and drivers waiting for the light to change—

Blinks. Squints.

Casually composed and attentively waiting for the light to turn, Hannibal sits in the driver’s seat of a car across the road. But that’s definitely not his car—some silver sedan with a District of Columbia plate. Will would almost suspect it was a rental if it weren’t for the glimmer of an E-Z Pass and a parking permit in the front window.

What’s he doing in Washington?

But stranger even than that is the disheveled fall of Hannibal’s hair in his face. It’s the kind of thing he usually keeps in check, and even brushes back whenever it falls out of place. Hannibal doesn’t seem bothered by it now, but Will knows it irritates him without fail. It’s the reason he wears that hair product when he’s not working, and yet—

Will tears his eyes away. Frowns at the ground for a moment, the cracks in the sidewalk. There’s really nothing to be suspicious about. If it weren’t for the fact that he’s *wearing* his glasses, he might even assume he’s mistaken.

Something tells him he’s not.

He could wave. Catch his attention with a smile. *See* him, after his own withdrawal. Smooth over this strange, roiling roughness inside him with a gentle touch. Center himself. Reassure himself. That he loves Hannibal, and choosing him is the right thing.

He so rarely gets to see Hannibal when he doesn't know he's being watched. And there is something about his expression, distant though it may be… there's something there that seems… different. Not the person Will knows, not quite.

Will slouches among the crowd. Surreptitiously looks up through his lashes, and makes a mental note of the license plate number. Frowns at the insignia on the front of the car—it's a *Chevy,* for God's sake. Will nearly laughs at the mental image of Hannibal, *his* Hannibal, driving a fucking Chevy Malibu.

The very idea is absurd.

What the hell is going on?

The light turns. In an instant, the cars start to move, and whatever the hell kind of nonsense fever dream Will is seeing is gone. He doesn't turn to watch as the car passes by. Barely restrains himself. He knows Hannibal; any kind of staring for too long will always catch his attention. Heightened instincts from long hours and quick reactions as a surgeon, he always said. Always aware of what's going on around him, for the safety of his patients.

And yet, whether because of the unfamiliarity of Will's presentation or the crowd he found himself in, the unusual locale, or the late hour, Hannibal didn't notice him.

Will is jostled as the pedestrians around him start to move, so he, too, starts to walk. The questions linger in his mind, heavy and foreign. None of the answers he comes up with have any sensible solutions, but it just leaves Will puzzled.

He gets into the bar without incident. Orders a drink in a slightly-miffed haze, then tips the bartender well for being snappy about it. Will finds a corner booth that's still being cleaned off and slips in. Waits.

Steels himself with a breath.

Now is not the time to worry about Hannibal. Unusual circumstances or not, he's clearly just fine.

Will's concentration must belong to his source. Must clear away the irritated fog in his brain, the pacing shape of a predator under his skin, and make himself what the man needs. A friend. A confidant. Someone to sympathize, empathize, to listen.

Someone who can get some answers about whatever the hell this hospital *staff meeting* is about, and why the hell Hannibal didn't mention it *before* Jack Crawford showed up on his doorstep—

"Well, that's a new look."

The man sits across from Will with his cold blue eyes and his shark's grin—a little too rough, a little too sharp. Like Will, he's a man teetering on the edge of composure and savagery at any given time. His volatile home life exacerbates that dissonance, whereas for Will, Hannibal is there to temper it.

He's in a good mood tonight, though. Will can already tell. Makes sense: the man *loves* when he thinks he knows more than the people around him, and can play with them like feral kittens chasing

grasshoppers. Catch, kill, and eat—but smaller than Will is used to. A little less dangerous, though not for lack of trying. Lack of experience, surely.

Will arches a brow, and a small, wry smile twists his lips. For all his concern at his source's inopportune attachment to the stability he provides, there *is* true enjoyment to be found here. Worthy, witty banter. Intelligent humor. A certain willfulness for cruelty, hidden beneath the motivation of healing. A solid pathology in which this man almost fits, but not quite. A diamond-shaped peg turned sideways, trying to fit with slanted sides into a square hole. In another life, Will might have considered if this man fit the mantle of the Ripper—at least before he knew his source the way he does now. Knows his thoughts, his concerns, the struggles with his wife.

Considered it, maybe, before Will understood the Ripper's heart.

"Thought I'd try something different," Will replies. Lifts his drink in solidarity and welcome, and receives a sly grin for his efforts. The man settles in across from him and makes himself comfortable. "Glad you could make it, Doctor Gideon."

"Wouldn't miss it, kid." Abel Gideon's smile widens. "So. That pow-wow with the Feebs. You interested?"

Will's eyes narrow. He leans forward. "Very."

Chapter End Notes

rebloggable chapter post

2:12

Chapter Notes

Hi!!! First things first, I am SO sorry I didn't end up updating last week. I failed to anticipate how much time my travel would take away from my productivity. Also, for how long it's been since I replied to comments. I swear I'm gonna get to work on that ASAP.

In the meantime, thank you so much to everyone who's still been reading and sending nice messages on Tumblr. I seriously appreciate it. Also, if you're ever looking for updates, you can always check my blog, where I have an insp tag for this fic, as well as updates about the chapters from time to time. Tumblr is also the best place for me to make announcements if I run into issues with updating, so it's always good to check there and see if I said anything if it seems like I'm running late.

Okay, and without further ado, we are finally there. Gala: Part One, commence. I expect there to be another, mmm, two or three chapters with gala content, if I had to make a guess. Oh—and aesthetic posts with Will & Margot's outfits will be going up on my blog. :D The gents' suits will be going up next week.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

<< Sorry if I worried you. I've been kept busy with gala prep.

>> Not to worry. I'm glad you have a friend to keep your mind occupied off less pleasant topics.

<< I take it you saw it.

>> Yes, I saw it.

<< No thoughts?

>> I have many. I will admit my curiosity but I was hoping you would come to me when you felt ready to speak of it.

<< I don't really want to talk about it at all, to be honest.

>> If that's what you'd prefer. I simply want you to be safe and well.

<< As much as I can hope for, I guess. What are you up to tonight?

>> For once, a quiet night at home. Perhaps more quiet than I would like. And you?

Will stands on the corner of 14th and F, and stares up at the darkened silhouette of the National Press Club. He knows he can't enter, but that's not the point of coming here.

His hand clenches around his phone. Gideon's words buzz in his mind, blending with Will's earlier sighting of Hannibal. No mention of business in DC. But he hadn't mentioned the FBI and Jack Crawford coming to Johns Hopkins either, had he?

If Will were anyone different, he might doubt what he'd seen, but he knows better. He would know Hannibal anywhere. He knows what he saw. He just doesn't know why Hannibal would lie about it.

Dishonesty begets dishonesty.

<< Homework with a side of homework. I should probably get it finished so I don't have to feel bad for taking a night off on Saturday.

>> A responsible decision. Your education is important.

<< So I've been told. I mostly just want it done. I'll see you on Saturday.

>> Not before?

<< I have a lot to do first, so probably not. Sorry.

Hannibal types and stops. Starts and stops again.

International flags billow over Will's head, canvas in the breeze. He's seen he photos of the inside, though it must be back to normal by now. Once, he'd thought he might work here someday. Now, he knows he'll never be able to see it as anything but the grandstand on which the Ripper confessed his love.

>> Will, you know you can come to me with anything.

It's not stated as a question. Affection and worry war in equal measures inside him; the sharp sting of betrayal. Of suspicion. Of sheer confusion. It doesn't add up. None of this adds up.

But there has to be a reason.

<< I know. ♥ Night.

>> Goodnight, mylimasis.

In the days following the Press Club murder and leading up to the Symphony Gala, Will is especially reserved, and more importantly, *absent*. It's maddening, given that what Hannibal craves more than anything is his presence, his insight. Whenever the impatience pushes him near to the breaking point, he rereads Will's letter to the Ripper. Breathes deeply. Sets down his phone, and reminds himself that in these delicate days, he must not push, lest his house of cards be reduced to shambles before he is well and ready.

But it is a near thing.

He has known Will to be an insular creature, but perhaps never to this degree. Will's complete and total withdrawal from Hannibal's company is, in all honesty, not what he expected. Will is fully aware that Hannibal has read his latest post, and Hannibal has been careful to remain neutral in regards to it. He has no desire to give Will the wrong idea, or make him believe that Hannibal is somehow wary of him when the opposite is true. Regardless, Will has retreated into his own home, his own mind—away from the place he is wanted most.

He still won't accept phone calls. Hannibal hasn't heard his voice for nearly three days.

Will maintains that he's not upset, but his behavior is certainly off in a way that, without seeing him, Hannibal cannot define. He would rather have Will nearby to monitor his reactions to the fallout of the Ripper murder, rather than suffer his reactions through a cell phone as proxy. He would especially have preferred to have seen Will before the gala to assure that all was well between them, and so their attempt to settle back into familiarity would not seem stilted to outsiders.

But as Hannibal sits in his study with psychology texts spread before him on his desk, he is left with a much simpler truth:

He misses Will. His voice, his touch, his wit, his singularly unique beauty. It's so simple to imagine Will reclining on the couch on the other side of the desk, working on one of his many assignments. Through his mind's eye, Hannibal can picture the firelight illuminating him in shades of gold, as it had so many nights ago. Will pausing to rest his cheek on the back of the couch, staring at Hannibal in that keen and quiet way he does, memorizing the details of a moment. Reaching up and over, across the desk, driven by fascination and the desire to touch. Will slowly sliding their fingers together. A sweet warmth in the glow of his smile. A subtle flutter in Hannibal's contented heart that knows peace for the first time since he lost Mischa.

They are, the both of them, complex creatures with simple needs. Which is why it's all the more frustrating that Will won't allow Hannibal to fill those needs.

The alternative is even more unsettling: as it stands right now, perhaps it is *Hannibal's* needs that aren't being fulfilled.

Hannibal closes the cover of the book. Sighs softly through his nose.

Will was right. Of course he was.

Being alone, especially now that he knows what it is like *not* to be, comes with a dull ache.

The anger bubbles inside of him, a slow boil that is thick and dark like sludge. It sticks to his innards and makes him heavy, sluggish with concern and doubt. Moreover than that, it *hurts*.

Will does not mention what he saw in Washington. He doesn't mention Jack Crawford. And Hannibal's texted conversations continue to indicate that he has no knowledge of either, despite Will knowing the opposite is true. And he knows the moment that Hannibal hears his voice, he'll hear the traces of Will's mood and try to unravel it. It's the only reason he's held out for this long.

But perhaps it needs to be unraveled. It's no secret to Will that his longing for Hannibal—and yes, for all to be forgiven—is prevalent in his mind. If he were a simpler person, he'd already have let it go; resigned himself to unanswered questions, and not have bothered to *think* so much.

But there has to be an explanation. Unfortunately, there doesn't seem to be any chance to find out, because before Will knows it, he is standing in a lavish hotel suite and spinning slowly in place, and the person in his reflection is no longer someone he recognizes.

Will inhales slowly and blinks at his reflection in the full-length mirror, false lashes fluttering. He feels satin, the strapless bralette and panties smooth and soft against his skin beneath the lace bodice that scratches his tender belly. The wide neckline of the dress leaves his shoulders and collarbones exposed, as well as the pale column of his throat. The half-sleeves are only semi-opaque from shoulder to elbow; Will's skin shines through in places where the lace and tulle are thin. In others, the textured cutouts that remind him of butterflies shift restlessly, ready to flee the hems and escape him. The high waist gives him the illusion of full hips, and the sheer skirt flutters like wings around his ankles, layers of tulle that float freely when he moves. The shoes, too, are lace—navy and sheer nude with pointed toes and modest stiletto heels.

Will's lashes lower, and fierce black eyeliner and indigo glitter lay thick against his lids. Gold shimmer on his cheekbones cohabitates with peach blush and coral lipstick. The pearl earrings Hannibal gave him glimmer subtly in his earlobes. His bangs fall soft and tamed across his forehead. The rest is pinned back in a swell of smooth, elegant curls at the nape of his neck, held with a hair piece that is a cluster of pearls and gems.

He is Wilhelmina. He is Margot. He is some amalgam of the both.

But that means he is not Will Graham.

And if he is not Will Graham, perhaps that means that he doesn't have to be angry at Hannibal tonight. He can leave that feeling for tomorrow, when the sunlight will illuminate his emotions and lay him bare.

"You look beautiful," Margot murmurs, and her hand settles on his back. She rubs small, soothing circles there. She is all red lips and black liner, bold color and silhouette, multicolored gems on gold chains that drip from her ears. She glitters with her jewel-encrusted dress that hugs her body from neck to waist, and flares into a truly impressive skirt that is full and shapely around her knees. The bodice is solid red, the remainder a stunning ombre that reaches pink and pale petal white at the hems and the full-length sleeves. It's a trendsetter piece—Will can honestly admit that it is as beautiful as it is bold, much like Margot herself.

Her updo rises and falls in soft waves, shimmer with her highlights that darken underneath, and a few loose tendrils of curls frame the gentle shape of her face.

If Will is beautiful, she is a bombshell—each of them stunning in different ways, in different palettes.

“We could be sisters,” Margot says with a smile. She laughs quietly. “I’d be lucky. I’d trade Mason for you any day.”

Will exhales slowly. Can’t take his eyes off his reflection, not yet. He doesn’t know himself like this. But he wants to. “I. Margot, tonight…” She waits patiently for him to arrange his thoughts, and gives him an encouraging pat. Will summons his courage. “I don’t feel like me, like this. I don’t think I want to be.”

“So don’t be,” she replies. Reaches for a stray curl and rolls it around her finger to form it, watches attentively as it falls perfectly into place around Will’s face. “Be who you want to be. Do you want me to call you something else?”

Will shakes his head gently.

He stops. Takes a breath.

“Maybe…” Rolls the feel of it around in his painted mouth, between white teeth. “Instead of being he or she, I could just be… someone. Just for tonight.”

“They and them?” Margot asks. She smiles when Will meets her eyes and slowly nods. “Yeah, hon, I can do that. Whatever you want. That’s the easy part.” Without warning, Margot’s expression is all business. “Ok, now the tougher part. Who are you wearing?”

“Tony Ward,” Will replies obediently, voice deliberately and carefully soft. Like this, he skims the line between recognized genders, fingertips tracing ripples on the surface of conventionality; the company he keeps tonight will likely be too polite to ask him to clarify. There’s a certain strange anxiety in that—and excitement. A rare opportunity to become what he so rarely gets to be. “And you’re wearing Michael Cinco.”

“And on the off chance that your sugar daddy doesn’t whisk you away when the evening’s over?”

Will’s cheeks heat and pool with blood. Given the event that he’s about to attend, he can’t even in good conscience correct her. Not knowing the cost of the tickets, of his gown; not knowing the prestige of the company he is about to find himself among—Baltimore’s elite society of blue bloods. Will himself has only ever been blue collar, at least before Hannibal. “Then we come back here.”

“And when he *does* take you home?” Margot wiggles her eyebrows at him, and Will bursts into anxious, half-hysterical laughter. “Go on, say it.”

“Marg*ot,*” he complains.

“You’re going to take him to *his* bed and claim his body and his entire mortal soul, Will. And you’re doing to do it with the lingerie we got you. You’re gonna own his ass. And he’s gonna own yours. Whatever you’re into, I don’t judge.” Will snorts and shakes with laughter, clutches at the edges of the vanity with his manicured and well-shaped gel fingernails. Margot grins and covers the back of his hand with her own, and meets his gaze in the mirror, beautifully earnest. “I know you’ve had a rough few days, but you’re amazing, hon. You deserve a good night, and you deserve the good guy who loves you.”

Will’s smile fractures, falters; tempers into something smaller and conflicted, and he drops his eyes away from Margot’s.

He doesn't know that Hannibal loves him. The only one who's confessed their love to Will is far from a *good guy*.

"Don't," Margot says firmly. "Don't look like that. You know he's nuts for you. He's gonna take one look at you tonight and go out first thing tomorrow and buy a ring."

"Margot," Will protests.

She holds her hands up in smug acquiescence, candy-apple nails gleaming in ferocious, elongated points. "Just sayin."

"You're getting ahead of yourself," Will murmurs, though that sentiment doesn't even begin to *cover* it. His eyes stay fixed on the detailing of his dress, the wide neckline and the pale glow of his collarbones. Regardless, his lips curl in a soft, complicated smile at the thought. "And we should get going."

"So you can meet your boyfriend's eyes across a dark and smoky room…"

Will snorts. "Something tells me this is the wrong era for dark and smoky. I'll settle for finding him, given how many people are gonna be there."

"Point." Margot grabs her clutch, both their phones tucked inside. "If anyone tries to give you a hard time about drinking, just tell them I have your ID. Believe me, they'll be too scared of pissing me off to actually check it."

"Noted." Will huffs. "It'll be a moot point soon."

"Little Capricorn." Margot grins and pinches his cheek, careful of her nails; Will swats her away. "Alright, alright. Let's get going before we cross the line from fashionably late into actually late."

Will rounds on Margot, startled. "Are we late?"

Careless in only the way Margot could manage, she shrugs. "Fashionably."

Will groans.

Champagne fizzes on his tongue, dry and sweet, as Hannibal surreptitiously scans the room in search of Will. Though the event has only just begun some ten or fifteen minutes ago, Hannibal has not yet seen him, and most of the guests have already arrived. CEOs, diplomats, government officials; the high-bred and the self-made sharing drinks and conversation, and, at the moment, equally denied Hannibal's attention.

The venue is no Florence, but it makes a valiant attempt—marble floors, vaulted ceilings, crystal chandeliers, pillars of stone that frame a truly massive event space. The tables around the edges of the room are covered in white cloths, laid rich with silver flatware and gilded plates, tasteful but elaborate floral centerpieces and hand-lettered seating cards. At the center of the room is a large, open space—room left for dancing both before and after dinner, and the chamber orchestra presiding over them on

a raised dais. The most talented of the symphony players, of course, are in attendance tonight, mingling with sponsors with wide smiles and some mixture of genuine and simpering thankfulness.

The marble tile below their feet makes up a design that is not unlike an elegant chessboard. Chess is the game they all play tonight, whether they know it or not—social maneuvering, where alliances can be struck or broken, and battles of wits may be waged. Hannibal is the most mobile and deadly among the rabble, a queen bearing the mantle of a pawn. He hears his secret title in the mouths of the many as he lingers. It seems the Chesapeake Ripper is a popular topic of conversation tonight.

He sips. Impatience sinks its nails into his innards, but he has waited this long for Will, and he's certain to arrive sooner than later. In the meantime, there is mingling that can be done—

"Ah, Doctor. Fancy seeing you here."

Hannibal turns, and is brought face-to-face with a tall and smiling brunette man; sharp black tux, deep green eyes. Hannibal smiles in return and holds out his hand for a brisk but firm shake. "James, a pleasure as always."

"You haven't called me recently," the man says with a widening grin. "Starting to think you don't like me anymore, Doctor Lecter."

Hannibal huffs an amused laugh. "You and I both know that the less I have need to call you, the better off I'll be."

James Deioss tucks one hand in his suit pocket, a casually confident posture that manages not to look pompous. That demeanor, combined with his unparalleled wit, has won him Hannibal's loyalty as a client: a talented defense lawyer with his own small practice, already making waves on the white collar circuit as a reliable name to call on for representation. "Quite right." He takes a quick sip of his drink, and similarly scans the crowd. "Elle's around here somewhere, I'm sure she'll want to say hi."

"I assume she's kept you out of trouble," Hannibal replies with a quirk of a brow.

James laughs. "She tries. She says I have a big mouth. I tell her it's made for big bites, and I haven't had issues chewing anything yet."

Hannibal chuckles. "My invitation still stands."

"Don't even say it," the man warns, good-natured. "No comfort food until I lose you a case, and my record is perfect. I'm stickin' to it."

"It's often traditional for clients to buy their attorneys a meal or drink after a successful case." Deioss' curious refusal of Hannibal's dinner invitations had first caused subtle alarm in the early days of their acquaintance. Though Hannibal maintains a careful watch on the man, he's never seen any untoward investigation directed at him, and has thus left the matter active in his mind as a personal quirk, but one to keep an eye on.

"I'm not a traditional lawyer," James says, and to anyone else, it might sound like boasting; to Hannibal, it is well-earned pride in one's professional reputation. It is a quality they share.

"No, I suppose not." Hannibal hides his smile with another slow drink.

"Maybe neither of us are traditional," Deioss says with a grin, and eyes Hannibal's outfit before the presumption can make him bristle. "Great tux, by the way. Elle makes me wear the penguin suit. In her defense, I'm not sure if I could pull that look off."

Hannibal glances down; the body of the jacket is silk brocade, a subtly stitched floral motif in a shade of navy that catches the light when he moves. Conversely, the collar is smooth, with black silk lapels. The floral pattern is echoed in his black bow tie, stitched onto ebony fabric with both black and white thread. The matching blue waistcoat is secured over a smartly-starched black shirt and pants, culminating with aniline leather brogues. The overall effect is both formal and striking, distinct from any solid-color jackets or standard black tuxedos. Fortunately, with company such as this, there tends to be more diversity in wardrobe. Still, Hannibal stands out among them.

"A talented tailor makes any garment exceptional, whether plain or patterned," Hannibal says with a faint smile. "From there, it's simply a matter of the wearer's confidence."

Deioss laughs uproariously. "Fair enough."

"Admittedly, I dressed tonight with another's color palette in mind." Hannibal huffs softly through his nose, and casts another glance around the room. It is, of course, all the more difficult when he's not precisely certain what he's looking for. "Wherever they may be."

Something lights up in James' eyes; an intelligent curiosity, a certain analytical aspect that had drawn Hannibal to him in the first place. The ability to file away pertinent information for use at a later date, for better or for worse. "This wouldn't happen to be in regards to that mysterious potential phone call I never received, would it?"

Hannibal presses his lips together, and wryly takes a sip of his champagne. Sharp, indeed. "Perhaps. Your assistance was rendered unnecessary at the time."

"I am *incredibly* curious," James replies, "about whatever person has caught your eye that you told me to, and I quote, take care of any and all things they should need."

It had been a phone call made in haste, but Hannibal would do it again. Had things turned out differently on that fateful night, and if Will had needed the support and unparalleled legal counsel Deioss offered, it would have been a boon for Will to have that information. Even now, given the FBI poking around, it is some small comfort to know Will would have a contact if he should need one. "I would ask the same of you now. Perhaps more completely and thoroughly than I did then."

He is given a searching stare in response. The back of Hannibal's neck prickles at the scrutiny. "Wow. It's serious, then."

Serious doesn't seem like enough of a word to cover Will's importance. Hannibal thinks carefully on his response before he makes it, but—

He cannot define what it is that draws his attention. It is not the sensation of eyes on him, but rather some preternatural itch. An awareness. The simple, sudden knowledge that he should look up, and he does.

The room seems to hold its breath.

Will is carrying himself differently. It's something akin to the way he moved the first time they met, that deliberation and grace in each step, a careful gait that can be attributed to high heels, but a strength that is settled in his core. That is the first thing Hannibal notices; there is undoubtedly something different about Will tonight, and it is not only his demeanor.

Framed in by antiquity and richness, Will is a figure of unparalleled beauty. Want clutches fiercely at his insides, kindled by the smug, prideful knowledge that the sublime creature he sees is entirely his.

The color blue against a pale complexion, delicate bones of his shoulders and collarbones exposed, the juxtaposition of bold lace and flowing tulle exposing tantalizing glimpses of skin. Dark, smooth locks, tamed in a way that Hannibal has never seen Will wear before. Tendrils of curls around a fair face, cheekbones and a jaw carved like crystal in stunning, angular facets. Dark, feathered lashes. Soft and smoky black and gray to frame eyes the color of the roiling sea.

As though Hannibal's attention were akin to calling his name, Will looks up. Across a crowded room, their eyes meet. And somewhere beneath the cliches and the old stories parents tell their children to romanticize simple chemistry, Hannibal is stricken by the knowledge that, no matter what he has learned, this is more than chemicals and neurotransmitters. This is deeper. Joyous. Near-spiritual.

Will's painted lips softly part. He blinks once, twice, again; a quick flutter of lashes. He breathes in and exhales deeply. And without bothering to turn to the woman in his company and excuse himself, Will seeks to close the distance and indulge this damning draw between them.

Hannibal glances at the man beside him, and is faced with a curious thing—head-tilted, silently assessing, James Deioss is entirely focused on Will. Hannibal is blindsided by the irritation he feels, the protectiveness that has grown fangs inside him. It itches for one wrong word to justify an attack; similarly, to shield Will from his view in entirety. But without a word, James holds out his hand and takes Hannibal's near-empty champagne glass. Looks at Hannibal, and tilts his head in Will's direction, a silent nudge.

Hannibal does not need to be told twice. He answers the call.

Chatter fades. Hannibal weaves through the crowd, side-stepping lacklustre dancers with ease, who sway in slow circles in an approximation of the starting waltz. Echoing from the marble floors and vaulted ceilings, rising and falling arpeggios take the place of their footsteps, made sweeter as the both of them find a clear place in the center of it all.

Within arm's reach, and so Hannibal reaches—hands meet in the middle, fingers wound together. Palms clasped. No words. It is the first time Hannibal can think of that he is not only uncertain of what to say, but absent of it completely. It seems Will is similarly affected.

Wide eyes. Pure intent. Will glitters and shines, and his gaze is drawn skyward at the crooning call of a violin, a siren's song that captures both of their attentions. Will's thumbs skim the backs of Hannibal's hands in venerative, restless paths. Hannibal wants to touch him. All of him. Will's arms, his legs, his neck, the slim curve of his waist, accentuated by a form-fitting bodice and flowing skirt. Even in stillness, the gown he wears appears as though it is covered in hundreds of butterflies along the hem, all ready to take flight, and Will with them.

Simple good manners would dictate Hannibal greet him, but Will seems no more interested in paltry words than he is right now. Everything is mute wonder, drinking in the sight of one another in formalwear and finery. Hannibal has never had the good fortune before this night to see Will in anything quite so fine. Now, it feels as though he can hardly stop staring. He feasts on the sight of Will here, his presence, his vibrant energy, the sheer aestheticism and singular beauty; the shudder of his breath as Will tugs, insistent, and brings one of Hannibal's hands to his waist. Steps closer, into the waiting circle of his arms.

Will's eyes lift again. Hannibal knows this time that he is listening to the interplay of instruments together, echoing as they progress along the same threads of a song. A waltz realized in complementary tones, a shared key with which a melody is unlocked and discovered.

One hand settles just above Will's hip. Hannibal is fiercely desirous and vindicated at Will's shiver, the flex of tendons beneath flesh. Shifting. Testing. Pressing into his grip with an air of pleasure and fulfillment, the play of a smile around Will's mouth. Will's arm loops around him, a slim hand settled to the side of Hannibal's spine. Their other hands twine together. Will's shoulders roll back, chin lifted. He tugs, a silent bid to move, and Hannibal does.

The first steps are cautious; call and answer. He does not expect the ease with which Will moves with him. Does not expect the glint of a challenge met in his eyes. The next set of three is more ambitious with the rising cry of the violin, a spin that Will falls into with cautious grace, but handles beautifully.

To a beat of six, they pause. Breathe. Feel the melody coming upon them, the interplay of a lingering piano chord and a singular drawn-out note from a violin in glorious harmony—nearly as harmonious as them together. Their future fleeting footsteps echoed by the swift notes of a piano.

Their eyes lock. Caught between them, a crackling energy.

A silent question asked by the monster in Hannibal's bones: *Are you ready?*

Slowly, the creature behind Will's eyes sees him staring, and starts to smile. *Yes.*

Then the music blooms and they are dancing, and around them, meaningless rabble step aside. Will's footwork is light, and he does not step as much as glide. He allows himself to be led by Hannibal's inertia, a certain restrained power that lives in deliberate, graceful movements.

It is a waltz, but not a slow one—inside the harmony is passion, adoration, and Hannibal allows it to fill him. To guide them, and take heart in Will's gracious trust in him. The way he allows himself to be pivoted by experienced hands, the way he leans into each swinging motion that takes them in circles. Hannibal is distantly aware of the lack of obstructions, of the weight of eyes upon them.

He doesn't care. Let them watch.

They are movement, they are art embodied. Forward and back, in sideways sweeps, Will spins out in a tide of ocean waves and silk, and back in again. Bodies brush and hands touch, holding tightly to one another as though they might fly apart if they're separated. Perhaps they would. Hannibal cannot say one way or another.

But everything swells. The song lifts, a cry of victory and sweetness and fulfillment, tremulous and joyous both. Will's lips are gently parted, a flash of teeth and an upward curl of lips, a shine in his fervent gaze. It is a dare, a bid for freedom, and Hannibal answers. Allows. At his gentle nudge, Will breaks free—spiraling curls, a skirt flaring in iridescent layers around smooth legs, Will's body moving in tight, spinning circles with arms above his head and an absolutely elated smile.

In a hall of stone, surrounded by finery and crystals and light, Will is ascendant, and Hannibal loves him.

Will's momentum carries him, a graceful lowering of his hands that creates an ephemeral silhouette of his shape within the air. Will slows, searching with his starving eyes, flushed with the exertion and keen pleasure as he reaches out for Hannibal. Finds him waiting. Brings them together again in the middle, falls back into his gravity, and allows himself again to be led.

Hannibal won't let go of him a second time.

The cresting crash of this moment has already stricken him. They are a wave, slowing as their initial spark catches and becomes a dim but smouldering glow. The descending melody is sweet and warm, a love realized and comprehended. It bubbles inside Hannibal like dry champagne. Will, too, is effervescent as they slow to a stop, and he reaches with intent; cups Hannibal's cheeks in his palms and draws him down.

Their noses brush, warm exhalations between them. Will touches their foreheads together in stunned and silent reverence, still too breathless to kiss properly. Glimmering. Glittering. Searching for something inside Hannibal's eyes, and nuzzling ever so softly at what he finds there, as Hannibal tugs him near and holds him close.

His sweet and stunning thing, holding the secrets of such ability inside of him. His Will, come from nothing, outshining every self-important blue blood with years of etiquette and lessons in rhythm, with only what he learned in his living room. More vibrant than every star in the sky.

Hannibal becomes aware of the sound of applause—admiring murmurs, not raucous, but heartfelt. Will is startled apart from him, chest still heaving for breath; his lovely flush darkens, rare-red. Will is most certainly prime enough to suit.

There is embarrassment written into the lines of his face and his body, but there is pleasure in the set of his spine, the gleam of his eyes. His hands fall to broad shoulders and anchor there, thumbs skimming the subtle texture of the brocade jacket. Will huffs a laugh. His curls are just slightly disheveled; his earlobes are studded with the earrings Hannibal bought him. If Hannibal were not so thoroughly folded inside the gentility of his civilized persona, he would surely growl with satisfaction. Instead, he touches one earring with the pad of his thumb, and sees Will light up at the silent approval. He does not search out the eyes of the masses. He looks for Hannibal, *only* Hannibal.

"Hi," Will murmurs softly. Then, with a sharp-edged smile that is as intimate as a secret, adds, "Sorry I was so distant. I've been practicing."

"Dear Will, you have no need to apologize," Hannibal replies.

The anger and irritation of the last few days are gone, dissolved as though they had never been. They are replaced by this feeling. This possession. This desire. This affection.

Love.

It is love—and it is not only serious, but permanent. Hannibal has coveted it, captured it, conditioned it, and will contain it with his own two hands.

Will's lips tilt upward. That clever thing inside him that stares out at Hannibal is contented, good-humored, and it says with Will's mouth, in a voice that almost sounds like his, "Forgive me anyway."

Hannibal can see it now. Whatever has changed, whatever has awakened it, it is closer to the surface than it has ever been, blending with Will's consciousness. Instilling him with grace and confidence. Radiance. Aiding in his becoming.

They break apart. Hannibal slips one arm around Will's waist, the facsimile of a gentlemanly gesture; in reality, a possessive tether. He guides Will away from appreciative eyes, from hushed voices, from the sweetness of the music, and toward what Hannibal promised him those many weeks ago—reputation, connection, and prestige. Everything he requires to build a career, to net him information, to assist him in his desire to find the Chesapeake Ripper. Now it's only a matter of time until Will closes that gap, and it can't possibly come a moment too soon.

Hannibal leans over, and his lips brush against Will’s hair. Feels his beloved shiver against his mouth, his teeth, when he replies, “You’re already forgiven.”

Chapter End Notes

The song used for Will and Hannibal's waltz is called My Truth, and comes from the anime Shigatsu wa Kimi no Uso / Your Lie in April. I knew from the moment I imagined the gala that I wanted this to be their first real dance together, since this particular song comes from the moment that Kousei realizes he's in love with Kaori in a field of fireflies. The show is fantastic (and has a LOT of feelings, ye be warned) and has an incredible soundtrack.

(Also, meet James Deioss, mentioned offhand in the early chapters, who will actually play a small part in this fic! He's my OC, and takes the place as Hannibal's lawyer, so please be gentle with him, and me. ;u;)

Now with a beautiful fanart of Will and Hannibal in their Gala finery by @maxeoff on Twitter! THANK YOU SO MUCH, MY FRIEND!! ♥♥

rebloggable chapter post
will & margot aesthetic post (including photos of the dresses!!)

2:13

Chapter Notes

Hello all my lovely readers!! I have been a super bad author person and have not yet replied to, like, two weeks' worth of comments. Given that it seems I'm going to be home sick today, I'm gonna try to get on that. In the meantime, please know that every single comment has made me smile, and I really do read all of them, and I thank you all so much for taking the time. <3

The end of Arc Two is in sight! I anticipate one more gala chapter, and then between two and four more afterward, give or take a few instances of Will or Hannibal yeeting. I'm seriously getting so excited y'all you have no idea. Arc Three is where the magic happens.

WARNING: this chapter introduces the only character that literally everyone in the fandom loves to hate, and all the upsetting things he is prone to saying. Instances of Mason Verger being a disgusting and abusive transphobic and homophobic douchebag are obviously not reflections of my own opinions as an LGBTQIA person. While Mason is relatively mild for... you know, being Mason, please be aware of any triggering content regarding his physical abuse of Margot and the awful words he says. That's all, thanks.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will maneuvers polite society with an ease Hannibal would not have anticipated or believed if he wasn't witnessing it himself: polite handshakes offered first, though Hannibal knows Will is uncomfortable being touched by those he doesn't know; demure smiles, a soft voice that does not betray the vicious, vibrant creature he knows lives inside.

There is something about Will tonight that gives Hannibal pause, reads his differed posture and withdraws from assigning Will pronouns outside his name to the strangers that don't know him. Though they've not had time enough between the two of them to talk about it, he notices the sidelong glances Will sends to him, and thinks he reads appreciation there in the tilt of his painted lips.

Will has never been just male, after all—from the very beginning, he has been transparent regarding the duality of his sense of self, conflicting with the familiarity of singular masculine pronouns. They are easy, automatic, a force of twenty years' habit. But they have never been entirely *right*.

There's pleasure in keeping Will's self a private thing between them. Instead, strangers will only see the shape of a beautiful young woman with soft hands and bright eyes, an adoring smile all for Hannibal. So tonight, unless Will corrects him, Hannibal has sense enough to follow the path laid down before him. If Will has embraced the feminine, or even the blurred line he often treads, Hannibal will gladly keep his truth in confidence.

Waiters make the rounds with hor d'oeuvres and flutes of champagne; Will handles his with poise and grace—no hesitation in reaching for one with all the assurance of one who drinks and does regularly. No one reacts, and so Hannibal does not, though he silently finds humor in the twitch of Will's nose at

the subtly sparkling carbonation. They sip idly and converse; Hannibal waits until he sees the threads of restlessness in Will's eyes, and then they move on. Fellow opera-goers and symphony attendees, hospital colleagues, though no one of particular note, until—

"Doctor Lecter," she says, and when Hannibal turns, he smiles.

"Doctor Du Maurier," he replies, and inclines his head; reaches for her hand, which she daintily surrenders, and brushes a genteel kiss across the backs of her knuckles. She is lovely in simple striking black, a dress with an asymmetrical geometric neckline, and a corresponding high slit up the other thigh, long sleeves that reach delicate wrists, and sleek black high heels. "Lovely to see you outside the hospital."

Bedelia smiles, aloof but charmed. "Enchantée." Her eyes slide to Will at his side, who has gone cautiously still. A slow smile curves her pinkened mouth, though there is something about it that is not quite kind. "I don't believe I've met your companion."

Will, for his part, does not shrink back; his posture is carefully curated with straight shoulders and lifted chin. He passes the champagne glass into his left hand, though does not yet extend to shake. Hannibal does not offer assurance, nor does Will look to him to be reassured. It widens his smile. "Will is my partner. Will, this is Doctor Bedelia Du Maurier, the Director of the Psychiatric Department at Johns Hopkins."

Will's eyes flash, though his smile appears genuine; his opinion of psychologists and psychiatrists is no secret. Hannibal is the exception, not the rule. But still, Will reaches out—and shakes with perhaps more firmness than Doctor Du Maurier expects, though never enough to be rude. Certainly not what she's expected from what appears to be a young, well-bred woman, and Will is neither. "Very nice to meet you."

"Likewise." She glances askance, and her expression softens infinitesimally at the sight of the young woman who appears at her side, resplendent with loose curls and a flowing forest-green gown. "Hannibal, you remember my assistant, Alana Bloom."

"The future Doctor Bloom," Hannibal replies with a smile, and greets her just the same. Alana flushes prettily at the touch of Hannibal's lips on the back of her hand, caught somewhere between embarrassment and pleasure at being acknowledged so.

"Nice to see you again, Doctor Lecter." She turns her eyes to Will, and—

Hannibal pauses. Will's lips are slightly parted, slow-blinking as he sees her. He sizes Alana up, not with malice, but something akin to… admiration? Attraction?

His brow furrows only slightly. It's true, he and Will have never spoken about whatever his inclinations may be, and they have never come up between them before. And, of course, now is far from the opportune time to seek clarification of Will's sexuality. But it picks at Hannibal like debris caught in his fine shoes, just annoying enough to be noticeable, though not enough to stop for.

Will's lashes lower. He smiles. "This is my first event like this. It's nice to see people around my age." Hannibal's lips press together. They do not purse. That would be untoward. But he cannot deny the creeping unpleasantness as Will's eyes linger on Alana's exposed shoulders and the sheer cap sleeves, her trim and belted empress waistline. "I love your dress." It does not entirely ring true.

Alana's smile is bright. "Thank you! I won't lie, I've only got, like, one nice thing to wear, and I think this one goes back to my senior prom."

Will laughs openly, so unlike him. “Yeah, I know what you mean.” He glances down, swivels his hips, and his skirt swishes around his legs. “I’m borrowing this one from a friend. In fact, I think she’s here somewhere…”

The mysterious friend. In all honesty, Hannibal had forgotten. Why hadn’t Will mentioned her? He would have been happy to make a detour for the sake of meeting one of the rare few who have captured Will’s affection.

Will tilts his head to the other side, inclines it toward the crowd. “Come on. We can find you a drink, and maybe we’ll bump into her.” Turns his eyes up to Hannibal with a smile, and nudges his side with his shoulder. “I’ll come back in a minute.”

Hannibal blinks. Huffs softly through his nose. He can’t politely excuse himself from Bedelia without so much as exchanging small talk, and so he is forced to concede. “Perhaps she can accompany you when you return. Our introduction is long overdue.”

“I can try, but no one makes her do anything.” Will grins and tips his chin up, presses his lips to Hannibal’s cheek, an affectionate peck.

It is all Hannibal can do not to turn into the touch and claim his mouth, kiss him deeply and thoroughly as he desires. Instead, he must let Will go. “Don’t be long, mylimasis.”

Will’s eyes soften. He glows from the inside with his happiness. Whatever interest he has in Alana, Hannibal is soothed that it is flickering and fleeting. Temporary, lasting not more than moments. Will belongs to him, and with him. Hannibal is certain he knows it. “Right back,” he says, and rests his hand on Hannibal’s arm. “Promise.”

Will disappears into the crowd, and Alana with him. Hannibal exhales, not quite a sigh, and turns his attention back to Bedelia.

She sips her champagne. She does not ask, and doesn’t have to.

Hannibal lifts his chin, and takes a sip of his own. Doesn’t rise to her challenge. Parries. “So,” he says. “How goes Doctor Chilton’s latest article?”

The breathless elation lingers beneath Will’s skin after their dance has passed, flickering like fireflies and lighting him from within. His cheeks are stained pink, pleased by Hannibal’s attention, his open affection. The anger drains away until it’s like it’s never been.

He does feel different—strong and graceful, capable. Beautiful, under the weight of Hannibal’s eyes, the arm around his waist. Hannibal, too, is fiercely attractive: the cut of his fine suit accentuates the lines of his body, his hair carefully arranged away from his face. His eyes blaze with pride and satisfaction. It’s a subtle thing; the way he holds on to Will as they make their rounds is an understated brag. In minutes, everyone in attendance knows who Will has accompanied here tonight.

Hannibal commands respect, and Will is afforded that same respect by any who cross their path.

Bedelia Du Maurier is intimidatingly beautiful, the kind of woman that, in a different world, Will might see Hannibal choosing as his companion instead, if not for their own fateful introduction and

stumble into intimacy. She is tall, fine bone structure and smooth blonde hair, eyes like frost and an unshakeable countenance. If Will is a creature of fire and passion, Bedelia is solemn ice.

But then there is a suitable distraction in Alana Bloom.

Will has spotted Margot several times throughout the night, a bright and shining princess attracting men like magpies. They, of course, could not be further from her interest. She entertains them with her effortless social graces all the same. But Alana—Alana is just the type of person Margot would be delighted to be interrupted for. Will owes her at least that much and more.

Alana Bloom has a strong personality and a loud, infectious laugh, and though her eyes linger curiously on Will for the telltale signs of his flat chest and his soft, lower-pitched voice, she has enough manners not to ask. She drinks her first flute of champagne in seconds, then picks up a second to carry with her. She grins when Will smiles about it, and tells a story about how her mother always chugged her first glass of anything, from coffee to wine. It's a trait she inherited, she says. Unapologetic gorging, followed later by savoring the nuance, extended enjoyment.

Will, too, can appreciate that.

He prowls the marble floors, wearing the demure likeness of a person he has never been, and never will be. Finds Margot among the masses, blessedly absent of her father or her brother. There's no love lost between the Verger men and Will, nor between their opinions and Margot's self-proclaimed proclivities. When she sees him, her relief is palpable—excuses herself to slip between identical men in black tuxes, the same height, the same haircut, a crowd that flocks to her that she can never turn away in the absence of a companion and a polite excuse.

"Thank god," she mutters as she attaches herself to Will's arm. She snags the champagne flute from his hand and knocks it back like an old pro.

At Will's side, Alana beams. "Huh," she says, "Guess frat parties just get fancier, but the guys stay the same."

Margot's eyes snap to her, wide and glass-bottle green—her lips part, and Will bites back his smile as she straightens up, suddenly at-attention.

Alana's classically gorgeous, dark barrel curls and Hollywood-red lips. She looks between Will and Margot with a smile, and tips her head to the side. "Are you related?"

Will and Margot blink, then glance to one another. It's not an unfounded question; they're of a similar height, weight, and hair color. From the back, one might even mistake them under the right circumstances. They certainly have more in common than Margot and Mason, and the thought is clear on Margot's face when she unintentionally snorts. Her eyes widen. She covers her mouth in a delicate gesture with one hand, beautifully embarrassed. "Sorry," she says. "No, we're not. Wouldn't mind it, though." Holds it out to Alana instead, and her eyes gleam. "Hi. I'm Margot."

Alana's smile widens. "Alana. Nice to meet you."

"The pleasure is *all* mine."

Will huffs a laugh. Margot shoots him the sort of wide-eyed accusatory expression that Will usually attributes to the silent command *get lost*, and his smile widens. He taps the edge of his empty champagne glass with one manicured nail and excuses himself, at least for a few minutes.

Here, his options expand. He could return to Hannibal, which has its merits, first and foremost among them being Hannibal himself. But Will can't deny that he's getting cagey from all the socialization, and the ability to wander freely until he can safely interrupt Margot and Alana's conversation and herd them back to polite company has appeal.

With pleasantly-warm cheeks and a mindfulness of the location he is about to stray from, Will goes. He weaves through warm bodies, colorful gowns and boring black tuxedos that are none so striking as Hannibal's. Some individual colors stand out, but not many—a flash of deep purple with black trim, dark satins and silks. Men wear their tuxedos like Hannibal wears plainclothes.

For a moment, Will entertains the wonderings of what sort of thing the Ripper would wear to an event such as this—but only a moment. Will squashes the idea before it can take root, before the figure of a man with a crown of antlers can form from shadows and stalk him through the ballroom on swift and silent feet. Before Wilhelmina can fully rouse from her relaxed observation of Will's evening, bid him to shed his high-heeled shoes and run barefoot solely for the thrill of being chased.

No, not tonight. Tonight is for Hannibal. And she may sit inside his mind, behind his eyes right alongside Will, but she won't overtake him. Not now. Not in this. They exist in a state of hesitant cooperation for the sake of their chosen one, their shared heart. Hannibal is worth the strain it takes to rein himself in, worth the empty ache of denying himself the wildness of what he so dearly desires.

He can train himself to want this. Animals can be trained to want anything.

It's a thought that carries an unpleasant undercurrent, memories of hollow laughter and dead eyes and a snide voice that Will once put himself in front of to protect—

No. It's not a memory at all.

Will pauses. Tilts his ear to the air and listens, then bites down before he can bare his teeth.

"And father has imported a new breed of boars—they're fighters, you see. Make richer meat. They'll eat just about anything. We're testing to see if we can breed them with common farm pigs; the sows make such a racket when they're cornered, but good meat is all about good breeding, whether they like it or not…"

Mason Verger's voice is as grating as it is unavoidable with the volume at which he speaks, no regard for how loud he is; he delights in the discomfort of others, and often hides behind the words of scripture like a believer, but with none of the mercy one would expect from the Son of God he so reveres.

Mason Verger is a blight. A plague descendant upon this place like the locusts fall on Egypt, devouring and destroying all in their path. Will hears him before he sees him, so he turns and retreats. If Mason is near, that means it's only a matter of time before he seeks out Margot. The memory of that purple bruise around her wrist last week now turns his stomach, lights coals inside him that smoke and glow.

There are many reasons the Verger men don't like Will Graham. And if he has to, he'll remind them exactly why.

"Margot," Will says sharply as he returns, and her head snaps up.

She knows that tone, and she blanches. "Mason?"

Alana frowns. “Huh?”

In an instant, Margot’s smile smooths over. “Oh, nothing really. Just my brother being an idiot.” She laughs, and casually links her arm through Alana’s. That same pretty pink flush stains Alana’s cheeks, and that concerned light in her eyes starts to fade. Margot turns her eyes to Will. “Two birds, one stone? I wanna meet your doctor.”

“Doctor Lecter?” Alana asks, glancing between Will and Margot, laughing when Margot looks suddenly affronted.

“Does everyone get to meet him before I do?” she demands with a haughty sniff.

“Not intentionally,” Alana replies. Her smile widens, and she tugs Margot along. The three of them weave through the crowd, around dancers and minglers. “He toured the psychiatric facility at the same time I did. I’m still… undecided.” Her brows draw together with a subtle crinkle of conflicted displeasure. “Some of the doctors there are… not as gentlemanly as Doctor Lecter, shall we say.”

Will snorts. That’s one way to put it. “Chilton?”

Alana’s eyes snap to him. “You know him?”

His mouth twists in tight displeasure. “There’s a reason I didn’t go to Johns Hopkins for my Master's and changed my major in undergrad.”

The lines constrict around Alana’s eyes. She huffs. “He’s a smug asshole.” Her features smooth as she exhales slowly, glances at Margot. “But Doctor Lecter’s great. He’s really nice.”

“He better be,” Margot replies, and he soothes his worried heart with fondness. “Will’s family.” Will shoots her a small, pleased smile, and Margot returns it with one of her own. “And your daddy would want me to make sure he’s good enough for you.”

Will’s expression twists drastically at the thought of his father meeting Hannibal. Margot cackles, wine-warm and proud of herself as they emerge from the throng—

—to a group that has grown exponentially since they left.

In addition to Hannibal and Bedelia, Will spots familiar faces; that aubergine tuxedo belongs to none other than Abel Gideon, deep violet with black lapels to match the gown of the shockingly blonde woman beside him. She is slender, waifish, with an eggplant-colored satin dress that reflects light from all angles, form-fitting until it flares in mermaid-esque ruffles from the knees. Gideon assumes an expression of polite intrigue at their entry that divorces him from the flow of conversation. His wife shoots him a narrow-eyed glance, none-too-pleased at his lapsed attention.

Will stiffens at the other couple he sees—for comfortably engrossed in conversation with the assortment of doctors is none other than Jack Crawford, in a fine suit of coal-colored wool with a subtle silk trim. At his side, a tremendously beautiful black woman, hair braided tight on one side in an elegantly edgy alternative to a side-shave, the rest let free in tight, glossy ringlets around her shoulders. Her gown, too, is satin; crimson red to match her painted lips, with a high, professional neckline. Though sleeveless, the holes cut for the arms plunge to her waist in a daring but tasteful flash of skin. The front is embellished with fine floral embroidery and delicate crystal beads, gathering at the waist and flowing down the full skirt. She holds herself with poise and stature, and is engrossed in dignified conversation with Bedelia Du Maurier. Jack, for his part, listens attentively. Will can tell from the way he looks at her that she must be his wife.

Still. Stumbling across him here isn't any better, when Will had certainly hoped to avoid running into him for some time. He stamps down the irritation he feels at Hannibal's casual proximity to the man. Any sign here will give away what he knows. Will's gaze flickers away; he'll maintain what he told Jack, and do it well.

If they see each other in public, they are strangers.

So when Hannibal senses the pause in conversation and turns to see the cause, Will's eyes are only for him. He takes Hannibal's offered hand without hesitation and places himself at his side. The calm that brings smoothes over the rougher edges.

"I thought I might've lost you," Hannibal murmurs with a good-humored smile. He squeezes Will's hand gently, and Will knows his cheeks are warm and pink when he squeezes back.

"I'm a good navigator. Not getting rid of me that easy," Will replies. Hannibal's eyes darken with amused possession. Pleasing Hannibal is fulfilling in a way that Will can't control or deny; his heart flutters as the space between them fills with private fondness. But Hannibal is attentive, and his eyes lift to Margot with curiosity—and then faint surprise. Will bites back a grin. Holds Hannibal's hand in one, and gestures carefully between them with the other. "Hannibal, this is Margot Verger. Margot, Doctor Hannibal Lecter."

Margot's gaze is sharp. Assessing. He sees her scan Hannibal's outfit and settle on something like satisfaction, but in the moment that she reaches first and confidently for Hannibal's hand, she is all Verger-business. Her smile is small, a little twisted, but genuine. "I feel like I know you already, Doc."

Hannibal's eyebrows lift slightly as he shakes her hand. His surprise blends with amusement, and satisfaction at her strong handshake. "You have me at a disadvantage, then, Miss Verger. This is the first I've heard of Will's relation to your family."

"Mostly just to me," Margot replies. She glances to Will, then to Alana at her side. Alana, to her credit, is only slightly wide-eyed at the revelation of Margot's heritage. "Mr. Graham worked for the Verger Estate before he got sick, and Will used to help him. We've been friends ever since."

When Hannibal's focus shifts to him, there is curiosity there, new consideration. "I'm glad for your friendship. What little Will *has* mentioned has always been positive. Though I believe your identity was meant to be something of a surprise."

Will huffs quietly. Shares an understanding, amused glance with Margot. Senses her tentative approval, and the telltale signs of her watching carefully—and her happiness at seeing Will safe at the side of someone who cares for him. When Will looks to Hannibal, one corner of his mouth lifts in a lopsided grin. "I'm not out of mysteries for you yet."

Jack's eyes are heavy on him now. Will ignores him, though he can see a faint flash in Hannibal's eyes; he, too, is aware of someone waiting for their attention. "I should hope not," he replies with a warm smile.

"Well, well," a voice cuts in, and Will and Hannibal seek the source in tandem. Gideon grins, ever-charming. Fortunately, Will knows that Gideon is capable of *some* subtlety. "Look who's all healed up."

Will tips his head to the side. Feigns a lapse of recognition—then smiles. "Doctor Gideon." His eyes slide to the woman beside him, the infamous wife. He can already sense her derision, her envious

gaze, her irritation, despite Will clearly and thoroughly being the companion of someone else. He has no time for that sort of petty jealousy; has never really been able to understand it. But that is only the first on her laundry list of less-than-flattering qualities that Abel has detailed at length. “I never got a chance to thank you.”

“No need, kiddo,” he says, and Will smothers a grimace; huffs when Gideon winks. “It’s all in the job description. Though some go above and beyond.” He inclines his head toward Will and Hannibal’s twined fingers.

Hannibal’s expression becomes an interesting mask of suppressed irritation and feigned contrition. Will presses his tongue against the back of his teeth; doesn’t like the idea of Hannibal having to defend this. Defend *them.* Defend *him.* Especially not in front of the woman who may very well become Hannibal’s supervisor.

Gideon is pushing for the fun of it; Will’s not in the mood to play.

Before Hannibal can speak, Will cuts in; leans against Hannibal’s side, just enough to be grounding, but not enough to appear coddled and reliant. “Fortunately, one cast in the ER does not a patient make. Our *second* first meeting went much better. No one even had to be hospitalized.”

Hannibal’s thumb slides slowly over Will’s knuckles, and he huffs a laugh. “It was a near thing, mylimasis. You were walking very quickly when you ran into me.”

WIll’s cheeks grow hot. Alanna is absolutely charmed, and Margot wryly amused. She’d heard Will’s tirade over the phone that night, stunned and irritated as he’d been after the first tenuous threads of his *agreement* with Hannibal Lecter . Their heart-to-heart phone call with had come later. Had floored him. Had set them on this irreversible path that has led them to now.

“Yeah, well,” Will murmurs. “Guess I’m lucky you caught me.” He averts his eyes. Scans the others present, and dutifully avoids meeting Jack Crawford’s persistently seeking gaze. Changes the subject. “I’m gone for ten minutes and you manage to amass a whole new group of acquaintances for me to meet.”

“Guilty as charged.” Hannibal’s smile is roguish—keenly interested as he matches Will’s look with one of his own, and lets it roll to the rest. “Doctor Gideon’s wife, Annalise,” who looks irritated that her husband did not first introduce her, “and Agent Jack Crawford, and his wife, who I am newly informed goes by Bella.”

“Jack,” Bella says with an exasperated smile. She shakes her hand and holds out her hand to both Hannibal and Will. At long last, they separate in the interest of good manners. “Phyllis Crawford. Nice to officially meet you both.”

A slight furrow between Hannibal’s brows, and a curious glance to Will; Will bites the inside of his cheek and remains impassive beyond a friendly smile as he shakes her hand, and then turns to Jack. “Nice to meet you, too.”

Jack inclines his head. “Likewise.”

Whatever tightness Hannibal sees in Will’s face he must take for reluctance and a sudden influx of nerves. It’s true that if he hadn’t already met Jack, this moment would have been fraught with anxiety. Now, it’s full of anxiety of another sort.

“Agent Crawford recently conducted some interviews at the hospital,” Gideon says, and hides a smirk behind his champagne glass. At his side, Annalise looks surprised, then irritated, and nudges him with a fierce and indiscernible flurry of whispers.

Hannibal’s smile is unshakable, if only because it is near-imperceptibly frozen in place. Will scans his countenance, and sees the pieces of Hannibal that are waiting for his anger. And yes, if this was news to Will, it’s likely he’d be blindingly furious. But it’s not news. Not anymore.

Still, Hannibal will expect *something* from him. And so Will quiets his voice, and slowly straightens his stance. “Oh?”

Jack tucks his hands into the pockets of his suit pants. His eyes slide from Will to Gideon with a shrug. “The primary function of the FBI is to ask questions and seek answers. Turns out it’s not as exciting as it seems.”

“I dunno,” Will replies. His voice is even. Level. A perfect bluff of quiet anger, and as such, he does not look at Hannibal again. “That sounds pretty exciting to me.”

“Were you able to locate what you sought?” Hannibal asks.

And oh, maybe he hopes to gain Will’s ear, his attention. But Will knows the answer already, doesn’t he? Will’s hand slowly curls in the fabric of his skirt. Yes, it seems Jack *did*—first Freddie, and then Will.

Jack’s face is a mask of pleasant indifference. “I’m not at liberty to discuss an ongoing investigation.”

Hannibal inclines his head, and the subject is dropped. His fingers brush against Will’s wrist, but Will neither pulls away nor accepts the placation.

Margot notices—of course she does, because she always does. She catches Will’s eyes with a faint frown, then waves him over toward the conversation she has started with Alana and Annalise—subtly at first, then more insistently. “Will,” she says. “I only know horses. You’re my boat person. C’mere.”

Will snorts softly. “Boats,” he says in exasperation. “Margot, your family doesn’t keep *boats.* You keep *yachts.*”

But he allows himself to be drawn from Hannibal’s side, to accept Margot’s whispered “You okay?” with a single, careful nod. She concedes with one of her own, and effortlessly envelops Will into the chatter.

Alana, it seems, is familiar with sailing, but only smaller vessels. Her eyes light up when Will mentions the *Nola,* stored safely in his backyard; Will flushes as Margot recounts Will at seventeen, scaling the side of their Sunseeker in cutoff shorts and a tank-top, barefooted and suntanned, to retrieve some forgotten belonging from the cabin. How Will had left dock-dirty footprints on the outside of the hull, and stared blankly at the marina docksman when he hollered at Will for making a mess. How Will blithely informed him that it was, in fact, a boat, and dirt would wash away in the water. How Margot had to bail them out, and Beau had laughed so hard that night that he cracked open a pair of cheap beers and handed them to Will and Margot for their trouble.

It’s one of the brighter memories. In the early days, there had been plenty of those. Going from fishing boats to working maintenance on luxury vessels had been an adjustment. Will had worked for weeks on outgrowing his Louisiana drawl, something his father never bothered with. He smiles, even

as Margot transitions her conversation to different iterations of opulence: horseback riding, international travel, exclusive events.

All the while, Hannibal's eyes are on him. Will lets him wait. He's too polite to interrupt, and Margot's stream of chatter is unyielding, and—

Will's not sure how it happens. He curses himself for not being more aware. But when a man in a vermillion tux comes out of nowhere and his arm wraps tightly around Margot's shoulders, the stream of their private conversation dies with the emergence of dread in her eyes.

"Mar-*got,*" Mason drawls, and the lopsided tousle of his hair trembles as he mockingly shakes his head. "Hogging the conversation, I see. You always were such a chatterbox."

Margot flushes bright pink with humiliation, and Will sees red.

Annalise looks confused. Annoyed. "And you are?"

Mason eyes Annalise up and down in her form-fitting gown; she sneers at his lascivious grin. "I'm Margot's brother." He jostles Margot at his side; grips her upper arm tightly and shakes her with it in the approximation of a friendly jibe. "Gotta look out for her. That's what family's for. Huh, Margot? Isn't that right?"

It's sickening, watching Margot's vivacious personality die under Mason's heel. Inside Will's mind, something shifts.

"Right," she whispers. The lines around her eyes tighten with pain.

Will's attention snaps to Mason's hand—around her bicep, his knuckles are white with the force of his grip.

"Mason," Will says softly, warningly, and lifts his chin in challenge. "You're hurting her."

Mason's lip curls as he looks at Will—and pauses.

Stares. Takes in his hair, his face. Lingers on his dress. His flat chest. Starts to laugh that terrible, manic laugh that has never been anything but cruel. "I'll be damned. Will Graham."

At his back, Will hears the others go quiet.

Will inhales silently through his nose, rolls his shoulders back, and knows that floaty, well-bred thing he was pretending to be is about to die a violent death. At least Will himself will be the one to kill her; better than letting Mason strangle the life from her and get there first.

"Let her go, Mason," Will warns. One corner of his mouth curls in something that is either a sneer or a grimace. He's not quite sure. "You wouldn't want to hurt your baby sister, would you?"

Mason's eyes are ice-bright, glittering like shards of glass. "Oh, I'm not hurting her." He looks down at Margot, her ducked chin. Cowed, trembling, trapped, just the way he likes all his victims. "Am I hurting you Margot? I'm not, am I? We're just having some fun."

Margot opens her mouth. Closes it. Glances at Will through her lashes, jaw clenched. Her eyes flicker to Alana, and something in her finds resolve. "Actually—"

"Great," Mason says. He shakes her again, and Margot muffles a whimper.

Alana's fists clench at her sides. She hisses through her teeth. She's a fighter, but this isn't her battle. It's his. Theirs.

Will takes a step forward. "Why don't you pick on someone your own size?" he murmurs. Takes another step, until there's only an arm's length between them. Softens, softens—*don't cause a scene.* He'll protect Margot above all; next on the list is Mason himself. He pitches his voice so only the Vergers can hear, "But my dad was right, wasn't he? You prefer the little ones."

Hannibal's eyes burn on his back. But Will is hot enough to burn all on his own.

Mason barks laughter. He grins at Will. "Someone my own size," he says thoughtfully. Slides his eyes down Will's body in a tangible violation. His thoughts aren't hidden. Mason prefers the shock and awe of horror. "Well, you sure grew up to be a big boy, didn't you?"

Will doesn't spare a look to see surprise in the faces of anyone else. He knows who he is. He is who he has always been.

Will reaches out. Smiles sweetly. Leans in, and there is a blaze in his eyes and he trails his fingers over the back of Mason's grasping hand, and feels him twitch in revulsion. Margot stares up at Will's face, but he's not *just* himself right now.

They whisper through a mouthful of aching teeth, "Why don't you come find out?"

Mason falters, and in the absence of his smothering, Margot's fire flares—she wrenches her shoulder from Mason's grip, which is sure to bruise, and retreats behind Will.

"Hey, now," someone behind him says, and Will picks out Jack's commanding tone. "What's going on here?"

"Just a little reunion," Mason replies easily. The humor in his eyes is bright as he straightens up. Mason's always been too smart, too organized in his cruelty to be categorized as something so simple as crazy. "Will and I, we go *way* back. He's so—heh—*different* from how I remember him. Changing all sorts of things up under the hood." His smile widens. "Will's still short for William, right? Or did you change that, too?"

Are you going to let him talk to you like that? she whispers in his ear.

With a slow smile, Will whispers back: *Are **you?***

Turnabout is fair play. Will reaches out with one hand and snags Mason by the arm, hard enough to bruise. Digs his nails into the red fabric of his suit jacket and pulls him forward. Turns him forcefully, and turns *with* him. Pushes him past Margot, past Alana and Annalise, past Jack and Bella and Bedelia.

Past Hannibal, and his clenched jaw. His pitch-black eyes that, just for a second, meet Will's. Neither of them are intimidated, in that moment, of what being outed in this company might mean for them. Not ashamed. Not humiliated in the least.

Will feels powerful.

And as he pushes Mason away from their polite conversations, Will sidles past Hannibal with poise and grace.

Their fingers brush.

Will keeps going.

When he reaches the edge of the crowd, far away from their company, Will leans in close to Mason's ear and says, "It's Wilhelmina, actually. And if you *ever* hurt your sister in front of me again, I'll gut you like one of your pigs."

He pushes Mason free. Takes sighing pleasure in watching him stumble, flushed with irritation. Mason shoots him a backwards glance. He's not intimidated. Intrigued, maybe. There's a crazed light in his eyes that Will doesn't like the look of, but knows it's always been there.

Mason won't tell. Why would he? And who *would* he tell, when the only man who'd take his side would be disgusted that he was bested at all?

Mason huffs a laugh through his nose. Stands straight, with Will opposite him. Bares his teeth in a grin. "Out of the wicked comes forth wickedness."

Will hums his amusement. He's not afraid of Mason Verger, nor will he be shamed by him. Not knowing what he knows about who he is and what he does.

Wilhelmina stretches beneath his skin, gazes out beneath her long lashes, and smiles with predator's teeth. Mason has no *idea* the wickedness they're capable of.

"Takes one to know one," Will replies, and watches with narrowed eyes until Mason has gone.

When he turns, it is to a shadow behind him—Hannibal, standing still with a deceptive calm, but in his face is the beginnings of a storm. Rage. The cold and clinical violence of a powerful man's insulted pride. He stares at the place where Mason stood. But Mason's not there anymore.

Will is here instead.

He reaches up, touches his fingertips to the center of Hannibal's chest. He waits. And when Hannibal looks down, their eyes meet.

Lock.

With the slow, deliberate momentum of the ages, Hannibal cradles Will's jaw in his palms. Tilts his face up with gentleness and intent, and leans down to meet him somewhere in the middle. Laps at the seam of Will's mouth; drinks the taste of champagne from his lips. One singular, lasting kiss that is so goddamn good that, if *this* is wickedness, Will would gladly go to Hell.

There's color high in Will's cheeks when they separate. His palm, flattened against Hannibal's heart, thrums with the steady beat of his pulse. Careful thumbs stroke over his blood-warm face; fingers curl inward, and his knuckles drift down the sides of Will's throat, down to his shoulders, where Hannibal's palms spread wide and flat and hot. Will flexes up and into them, if only to feel the heat, the weight. Hannibal kneads obligingly at the tension in Will's muscles, and he melts.

"What are you thinking about?" Will murmurs.

Hannibal stares. For a while, he says nothing at all; searches Will's face and deep in his eyes, and gazes into the place where Wilhelmina rests—so deeply that she stares back. Slowly, like he can see her, Hannibal smiles. "That I am more fortunate than I ever could have imagined when we met."

Will laughs, breathless. Looks up at him in wonder. "Why?"

Hannibal's lashes lower fondly, gazing with half-lidded eyes as he traces Will's face with reverence. Savoring. "For more reasons than I can name. Your intelligence. Your beauty. The ardency with which you protect those you cherish."

Will swallows hard. Worry crashes over him, followed by choking fear, and he tears his eyes away. "You heard what I said to him."

"I did."

Will exhales through his nose until he has no breath left. He chances a glance up; sees no revulsion, no concern. Only affection. Only desire. How? *How?* "And that *really* doesn't worry you?"

Hannibal's fingers trail down the line of Will's arm until their hands meet and twine between them. "On the contrary, my darling one." His lips twist with an expression that is almost a smile. Almost. "Violence in the name of defending one's kin is not violence at all. It is the most ancient and sacred rite of our kind."

Will stares at him. Stares and stares and stares until his eyes burn with something other than the dregs of rage, and his chest is hot with something other than lingering anger. Will slips his free hand upward, gently scritches gel-formed fingernails through Hannibal's hair; blood red eyes sharpen with intent, and he shivers when Will reaches the nape of his neck. Flashes his teeth when Will trails his fingers there, back and forth over the rolling hills and valleys of his spine.

This time, Will cannot find concern in any cell of his body. He feels some approximation of both full and hollowed-out. Hannibal speaks so casually of Will's ardent protectiveness; Will wonders if Hannibal knows how keenly he is loved.

He can't tell. Not yet. But as he looks up at this incredible man, his mouth splits on a smile until there is no reluctance or worry left—only wonder. The laughter bursts from him, falls like rain, and Hannibal soaks it in. Hangs on every sound of it, like every raindrop striking parched earth.

Will wonders if he's ever felt so adored. Wonders if he's ever been so prepared to believe it before.

"You are so fucking weird," Will whispers, and surges up on his tiptoes to taste the promises from Hannibal's tongue.

Fuck Mason Verger. Fuck polite society. God, their rules are so twisted and inane that maybe everyone's forgotten what it means to do what's *right.* That manners and morality are not mutually exclusive, but meant to be bedfellows. That protecting home and hearth means more than the sensibilities of rich people who have no idea what it's like to feel unsafe anymore, if they ever did at all.

Will feels safe here. Clutched in Hannibal's hands, held jealously and kissed fiercely in a clash that he himself began, Will knows Hannibal would let him stay until they're forced apart.

Will breaks away when his lungs scream for oxygen, and rubs the faintest traces of coral lipstick from Hannibal's wet mouth with the pad of his thumb. Hannibal's pupils are blown-black, fathomless. "I need to check on Margot," Will says through shallow breaths. Nods once in determination. "And if I try to threaten anyone else, you should stop me. Once is enough. Okay?"

Hannibal inclines his head, but doesn't quite nod back. Chastely kisses the whorls of Will's fingerprint like it's still just automatic, some instinct built into him to adore indiscriminately with such sweet physicality, and Will's heart clenches so hard he feels he could burst. "Should anyone

deserve it more than Mason Verger, I may instead choose to join you. But in the absence of anyone so disgustingly rude, I'll endeavor to keep an eye on you instead."

Will nods again. Leans in and up to nose at Hannibal's cheek, brushes his mouth against the shell of Hannibal's ear. "And don't think I forgot about the damn *FBI,* Hannibal. We'll talk later." Will stands down. Twists his mouth in a wry smirk as he touches the brocade of Hannibal's jacket and worries his lower lip with his teeth. Glances up through his lashes, and lets a crooked smile take over. "Maybe *much* later."

Hannibal's chest rumbles with something like an assenting hum. But if Will didn't know any better, like some great and wild cat, he might think Hannibal was purring. His eyes linger on each line and curve of Will's body, but his attention feels like slow-smoldering coals in the pit of Will's belly, patiently kept glowing and alive. Waiting. "Later, then."

And if Will is good at one thing, it's fanning embers to flame.

Chapter End Notes

Gala aesthetic posts will be going up again, featuring the lovely ladies and the dashing gentlemen (plus Mason).

rebloggable chapter post

2:14

Chapter Notes

Now we're getting somewhere. :3c

It's my intention to have this second arc completed by the end of September, since I'm moving by/on October 1st. I'll let you know for certain which week I intend to take off to complete my move once we get a little closer. Thank you all so much for your comments. You seriously have no idea how much I adore them and how much they keep me going.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will navigates the formal dinner portion of the gala with a certain grace that speaks to the practice he committed to etiquette training. He does not stumble over cutlery as they transition from appetizer to entree, and deftly works his way around the changing courses and changing wine glasses with sure hands and gently-flushed cheeks. His eyes are bright but alert, and Hannibal pays subtle attention to the way Will watches the Verger table with cold consideration, though Mason and Margot Verger are separated by a slew of the inner-circle affiliates of their patriarch.

Mason Verger's voice carries. He makes no mention of Will's presence, nor does he even spare a glance in their direction. Does he sense the danger that still radiates from Will even now, Hannibal wonders? Does he feel the eyes of the young wolf upon him from across the room, and discount him as a threat because of his youth and his size? It would be a mistake to do so. A high-society stature does not make him safe.

But he is not Hannibal's prey to claim.

Hannibal has never seen the fury in Will's eyes burn so brightly for anyone before. It's a hatred Will has not even matched for the likes of Freddie Lounds. Mason Verger is unique in the urges he is able to awaken inside Will's mind. Hannibal would very much like to see those urges from the other side. The inside.

Will hides it well; maintains polite conversation all the same, chats amicably with Abel Gideon and holds a tight, polite smile for the shrill voice of Annalise. It's no secret to Hannibal that she is, in some way, jealous of the attention Abel gives to Will. It's nothing more than friendly banter that stems from passing familiarity and compatible personalities, but even that seems enough to allow her insecurities to flare, painted clearly across her face. Will has always been a thoughtful and witty conversationalist when his interests are captured. Abel is a sharp man who, it seems, has settled in his marriage for a woman who he has almost nothing in common with, and who does not hesitate to clutch at his arm and make her displeasure known. When Abel's expression flickers with irritation and he turns back to her, heated whispers between them, Will's gaze slides easily to Hannibal. They share a quick, silent look of shared distaste; conversation picks up between them easily where it had left off.

What he said to Will is undoubtedly, undeniably true—in finding Will, Hannibal is more fortunate than he would have ever dared to dream. That prowling creature inside his beloved is closer to the surface than it's ever been, and it has fangs and claws fit to kill. It is undoubtedly a predator. Only time will tell if it is a carnivore.

If *she* is a carnivore.

Wilhelmina: the name of artists and queens, celestial bodies and great ships. It is the very definition of power and protection, and Hannibal cannot help but wonder the depth of her sentience. Will had mentioned once, in the very beginning, that he held two versions of himself inside the cradle of his blood and bones, and that neither was ever alone, nor unaware of the other. Such implies that Will as a whole may even be an amalgam of two personas, the possibility of which is undeniably intriguing.

It's not dissociative. It's cooperative. Two incongruous halves of a singular creature, attempting to maintain symbiosis. Where does the boundary between them lie? Only time and further knowledge of Will can grant him that information.

One thing is for certain: he will have to get his hands on Frederick Chilton's notes. It seems clear now more than ever that the details of that intake interview and Will's tentative psychological profile may prove invaluable to understanding him.

Hannibal looks when he feels eyes on him; catches Will watching him in profile, the soft light making his skin, his hair, the delicate beading on his dress glow. And yet, it is Will who is staring at him. The sensation is… pleasant.

Hannibal turns his attention to Will with a quizzical lift of his brows. A silent question: *did you say something?*

Will's mouth tips in a small, intimate smile. His lashes lower, and he gently shakes his head. The coral tint of his lipstick has faded away, leaving only the inviting deep blush of his natural lips. Hannibal prefers him this way. It's a color he seeks to memorize, along with anything and everything about Will Graham.

With time, the plates are cleared away; the usual greetings and thanks for their generous donations begin and end, and they are bid to enjoy the evening and the event. Guests return to mingle and chat; but in the moments before Hannibal seeks out more acquaintances to introduce Will to, he guides him aside. Finds a quiet spot where Will can sidle close to hear him better, softly touch Hannibal's arm in an attentive signal that he's listening.

"How are you doing?" Hannibal asks as he leans in, and his lips brush Will's temple.

"Still angry," Will murmurs back. "But I'm okay."

"Understandable that you'd be angry." Hannibal touches his waist, and Will arches gently into the warm weight of his hand. The texture of the lace is somewhat rough, though even more stunning up close. Tempting little glimpses of Will's skin shine through, perfect and pale. A question hovers in his mind, and Hannibal picks careful words to avoid voicing it for all to hear regarding his careful skirting of Will's pronouns. "Socially, how do you feel? Out of regard for your presentation and uncertainty for your preference, I know I've been cautious with my introductions. Have I taxed you with meeting too many new people?"

Will exhales softly through his nose. Lovely though he is, he looks tired—but turns his attention to Hannibal with such fond appreciation. "No, what you've said is just right. I'm not too worn out, I'm

sure I'll be okay. I know there's not more than an hour or two left." His eyes narrow, and he casts a sly glance beneath dark lashes, shockingly blue eyes accentuated by the indigo tint of his gown. "Whether Margot drags me to the afterparty is dependent on whether or not you decide to be chivalrous and save me."

Mind assuaged by Will's reassurance, the flicker of his tentativity fades to nothing in the face of Will's tease. His desire is intangible now, curling through his lungs like smoke. Promising. Thickening, as his eyes sharpen on Will and see hunger there. "I never took you for one that needs saving, mylimasis."

A coy smirk. Where their sides are pressed together, Will curls inward; his hands flatten on Hannibal's chest, just shy of his lapels. The space between them charged with electricity. "I don't. That's how others would see it, though. A gentlemanly gesture, right? Escorting your date home?"

Will is on the prowl again, a flash of teeth exposed with his growing grin. Hannibal lifts one brow, and lets his other hand settle at Will's hip. Rubs his thumb over the sharp crest of it, hidden beneath layers of tulle. "To your home?" Hannibal says, his voice a rumble that carries only to Will, "Or to mine?"

Will trails his fingernails over silk brocade, feeling the subtle texture beneath smooth gel; rubs one satin lapel between his fingertips. His eyes fall to the source of such delightful textures, then slowly lift: linger on Hannibal's shoulders, his throat, his lips, his eyes. That smile of his has faded into some look of great intensity, and hesitancy. "I don't want to presume."

Every time they push past one point, another lies in wait. Hannibal knows with certainty that tonight is a new milestone. Will knows he is always welcome in Hannibal's home. What he is not certain of are the words he leaves unsaid, a silent desire hidden within the light in his eyes.

If Hannibal's lungs are full of smoke, in his belly is a fire, rich and smoldering. The coals have been glowing for weeks now, so patiently stoked and kept at bay, prevented from consuming Will in entirety in any and every way Hannibal can have him.

But now.

The hand on Will's hip drags up to mirror its twin, both palms spreading wide and warm over Will's slender waist. Will's lips part as he inhales softly through his mouth, too gentle and measured to be called a gasp, and Hannibal leans down so Will can see his sincerity. His want. "My darling," Hannibal says, "If you want to come home with me, you need only ask."

He catches the next words before they slip unbidden off his tongue: *my home and myself are yours*. They are true, but this is not the venue in which Hannibal hopes to say such things, where the buzz of others' meaningless conversations are a drone in his ears, and there are so many concurrent senses to be indulged that he cannot commit them all to observing Will's reactions.

His reaction now is a softening of his mouth, a gentleness around his eyes that speaks to Will's pleasure at the acceptance. But before he can speak, his eyes slip over Hannibal's shoulder and focus on something behind. Will glances up with a small, wry smile; inclines his head to denote his understanding, and to put off further conversation. "There's a woman who keeps glancing at us. She's waiting to talk to you, but she doesn't want to interrupt."

Hannibal huffs softly, if only to see Will's amusement at him doing so. However, it's with a frisson of pleasant surprise that he finds one of his favored high-society fellows politely but impatiently awaiting him. "Mrs. Komeda, splendid as always."

The fine-boned willowy woman waves him off with familiar exasperation, her black, pin-straight hair fluttering around her jaw as she shakes her head. “Hannibal, really. How long have we known one another?” She pins him with sharp, dark eyes that glitter with satisfaction as they slide to Will and take him in. She reaches out her hand without waiting for Hannibal to introduce them; it is, of course, part of her no-nonsense nature. “Eloise Komeda, dear. And may I say that you are absolutely lovely, and I have never seen Hannibal smile at anyone the way he smiles at you.”

It’s clear she takes Will off-guard. His eyes widen, cheeks flush, and a shy smile pulls at his pinkened lips in a way that is absolutely lovely, indeed. “I, um. Will Graham, ma’am.”

“Don’t you ever call me ma’am again, and we’ll get along just fine,” she replies with a wide, warm smile. Her head tilts, a curious expression crosses her face. Calculating, contemplative. Her eyes scan Will’s form from head to toe, and she hums with consideration. “Pronouns?”

Will’s jaw goes tense, and Hannibal steps in before he can panic. He sets his palm on Will’s lower back, a quiet comfort. “Will, Eloise is a novelist, activist, and a guest lecturer at Harvard for their Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies department. Eloise, Will is my partner. Please be gentle.”

She levels him with an unimpressed look. “You wouldn’t keep anyone who couldn’t handle me, Hannibal. That’s just a fact, and you’d know that long before I ever met them.”

Amused, Hannibal raises his hands in concession. “Very well.” And to Will, “I’m afraid I have no control over her.”

“None whatsoever.” But when she glances at Will, her smile is encouraging. She reaches for his hand and winds it in her own. “Preferred pronouns, Will?”

“Um.” Will licks his lips; glances at Hannibal and back to Eloise. Softly he says, “They and them are fine. Usually I just use *he* because it’s convenient, but tonight, I’m…” Will’s hand makes a vertical sweep, indicating his presentation. It speaks for itself.

Eloise nods sagely and pats the back of his hands. “It’s all a construct. Be only what you are comfortable being.” She stares at him, then turns her raised brows at Hannibal. “Hannibal, this young, sweet thing is much too good for you.”

He doesn’t disagree, of course, but nothing short of death itself will pry Hannibal away from Will now.

Hannibal huffs a laugh that is drowned by Will’s loud, incredulous snort. Both Eloise and Hannibal turn their attention to him with surprise; Will looks embarrassed at his outburst, but not apologetic. He leans into Hannibal’s side in a show of solidarity and reaches for his hand. Their fingers tangle at their sides, and the sensation settles something inside Hannibal’s gut. Yes, he knows Will wants to stay with him; he’s worked very hard to make it that way. But the acknowledgement is pleasant all the same. “With all due respect, Mrs. Komeda, I’m much more selfish than you give me credit for.”

“We are of one mind in that regard,” Hannibal murmurs in return, and Will gifts him with a small, beatific smile.

Eloise Komeda is not an unintelligent woman, nor is she unfamiliar with Hannibal’s solitary ways. She watches Hannibal like a hawk with shrewd calculation in her gaze, but whatever she reads in him must be the truth. “Well, I certainly never thought I’d see it.” Her eyes soften. She smiles. And to Will, she says, “You must truly be something special, dear.”

Will laughs quietly at that, disbelief in his voice; in this moment, his modesty is intolerable. Hannibal squeezes his hand once and says, “Will is nothing short of a singular event in the universe that I count myself lucky to behold.” Will ducks his chin, but a glimpse of him in profile reveals heated cheeks and a bitten-back smile, silently pleased. Hannibal absorbs the aura of Will’s happiness. Internalizes it. Reflects it in a fond tilt of lips. “Are you ready to meet more of my associates?” Hannibal asks, and rubs his thumb over Will’s knuckles. “Or should I set you free to go find Miss Verger?”

Will shakes his head in a flurry of curls let loose from his lovely updo and flashes of pearls under antique light. Inhales, exhales in a wave of glimmering beads. His bashful, gentle persona is swept away by cunning and cleverness. “No,” Will says, and glances up through his lashes. “I want to meet more of your friends.”

Hannibal does not miss the change of descriptor; he’s not ignorant to the cause. Mrs. Komeda brightens with approval, silently soothed by Will’s subtle creation of intimacy when Will knows well that Hannibal has few people he counts as *friends*. In a handful of words, Will has softened Hannibal’s image, and others’ perception of him. With a sidelong look and a smile, he has painted Hannibal a masterpiece of reserved and dignified yet undeniable humanity.

They could be so very dangerous together.

“Well, let’s go then,” Eloise says with a wide, sharp smile. “Hannibal Lecter, finally settling down. They are going to just *love* you, dear Will.”

Will keeps an eye out for Margot as the night goes on, and is vindicated to see her flutter about here and there without any shadow of Mason darkening her steps. And, Will is pleased to notice, most often Alana Bloom is close to her side.

With that knowledge settled, it is much easier for Will to dedicate his attention to Hannibal’s many associates and acquaintances, colleagues and coworkers. It doesn’t take Will long to realize that though Hannibal is friendly with many, he proclaims himself the friend of precious few. Namely, none.

Will won’t deny the realization somewhat unsettles him—with all these accomplished *others* that could have easily taken his space in Hannibal’s life, why is it that Hannibal is so insistent on having *him?* It’s an odd revelation, to realize that while Hannibal is the primary provider of stability in his life, it seems conversely true that Will is the sole source of companionship and affection in his.

He stands a little closer to Hannibal after that.

Watching Hannibal interact with his associates is like not unlike watching a journalist direct a conversation with a witness. Hannibal asks questions and nods attentively as they speak, and when they ask questions of him, he tells stories of what he’s seen, places he’s experienced, and manages to do so while revealing surprisingly little of himself. He transitions from conversation to conversation, even language to language. Will watches him slip from English to German to Russian to Italian without hesitation. It’s once Mr. Komeda appears at Eloise’s side and Hannibal takes up a rapid-fire conversation in Japanese with the man that Will cuts his losses and decides to go on the hunt for another glass of champagne.

“I’ll be back,” Will murmurs. “I’m gonna go get us something to drink.” Hannibal nods once without missing a beat, though Will feels his eyes linger as he slips away into the crowd.

Even as they near the latest hours of the night before morning, the event is still densely populated. Will navigates primarily with landmarks within the room, and carefully avoids looking at anyone too closely, lest he pick up on stray threads of thoughts and impulses that he doesn’t want to deal with chasing off; not when he’s already got his hands full with balancing his *own* persona for the evening.

At events like this, even the silent are loud. So many conflicting relationships and desires that it’s almost impossible to miss out on the cues, the dances of wit and propriety, emotions flaring hot or steadily suppressed. It’s a full-time occupation, but fortunately, nothing is expected of Will here but being Hannibal’s companion. No one within Hannibal’s circle knows him or wants anything of him. It’s almost refreshing to allow himself to be someone else, *only* to be Hannibal’s.

“Graham, fancy seeing you again.”

Or not.

Abel Gideon seems to have escaped his wife for the moment, and every inch of his freedom is visible in his blazing eyes and tight jaw. Abel hates events like this; he’s told Will so a million times. He doesn’t mind the Symphony itself; sitting in silence, absorbing fine music. But the talking, the socializing, the empty conversations at Annalise’s direction and behest—he detests that.

Will takes a breath and slowly exhales. Beneath Abel Gideon’s skin is a violent man with all the frustration and the ability to snap, should Annalise ever push his buttons beyond repair. But here, now, Will can smooth those sharp edges until she breaks him down again. “Abel,” Will replies with a nod. “You really shouldn’t push Hannibal like that, you know.”

“Just keeping him on his toes,” Gideon replies evenly. His head tilts as he surveys Will, and Will bristles at the presumption of it.

Still, he keeps his voice carefully controlled when he says, “I’d thank you to stay out of my relationship when the thing that’s actually frustrating you is your own.” Gideon tenses like a wound spring, and Will relents. “I’m going to get a drink. Would you like to accompany me?”

Gideon takes a long, slow breath. He nods. “Yeah, I could use a drink.”

They fall in step side by side, and Will allows himself to become Gideon’s confidant. Lets himself assume controlled confidence, that same listening ear. “Tell me what’s bothering you.”

He already knows. Annalise fights every word he says. She doesn’t genuinely like the man her husband is, and resents every moment that he refuses to make himself into the partner she imagines. She rides the border of socially-acceptable scolding with hard grips to his arm and “teasing” smacks when he displeases her, but Will knows her temper at home gets the better of her. Abel Gideon is, at heart, a good man. He has always held himself back. But every subsequent event like this pushes him closer to that edge. These little chats they share help Abel to find his patience. To know his plight is seen and heard by someone who does not think less of him, without having to cross the barricade of embarrassment that a man such as Gideon attributes to professional help.

And in return, he tells Will anything he asks.

Gideon is quiet for a while. Longer than Will might expect. “I love my wife,” he says. “It’s a distant feeling now, but in a way, I do.”

Will raises his eyebrows. Blinks, but nods once, a silent signal to continue.

Abel takes a breath. A long one. It trembles on the exhale. “That kid. That little *bastard* that you threw out of the group. I don’t think I’ve ever been so damn mad.”

Will bares his teeth in a grimace. They weave through the crowd, side by side. “We have a mutual antipathy for Mason Verger, then.”

“The way he looked at her.” Gideon’s lip curls. “He walked by me earlier. And he told me I should *teach that pretty sow to mind her mouth.*”

Will’s jaw clenches. “That sounds like Mason.”

“I have my issues with Annalise. A whole damn host of issues, as you know. But—”

“But she’s yours to love or hate,” Will replies quietly. “His threat is a trespass against your dominion.”

Gideon’s attention snaps to Will, and his exhale hisses between his teeth. *“Yes.”* His nostrils flare. He takes a moment to take a breath. Straightens up, and contains his rage. “You’re a constant surprise, Will.”

“Why is it a surprise?” Will murmurs as they come upon the table, champagne glasses kept at the ready for waiting patrons to pick up as they pass. He lifts one and takes a sip. Hands another to Gideon. Quietly, so that others do not overhear, he says, “You’re one of the few who knows what I do. The type of mind I have made myself…” Will’s lips purse. *“Intimately* familiar with.” Will’s eyes slide to him in return, a sidelong glance. “If I can understand *him,* it is not so far of a departure to understand you, Abel. There are certain… similarities.”

A vein in Gideon’s jaw twitches. “I’m not a killer.”

“You haven’t killed anyone, no,” Will acknowledges. The silent addition hangs in the air: *yet.* “But you’ve thought about it. Fantasized about it, maybe, in the worst moments. Those fantasies give you relief. And the silent implication that you might be robbed of your catharsis is threatening to you.”

Gideon’s muscles are rigid, locked, and Will turns. Softens his expression, and smiles. Not one of anger, or accusation, or even one of coldness. It’s open and understanding. Exactly what he needs. Will reaches with his free hand and rests it on Gideon’s outer arm, a consoling touch.

“It’s completely natural,” Will says gently. “All of it, Abel. We deal with stress and trauma in different ways. To wish violence on one’s jailor isn’t complicated. And to imagine someone else taking the retribution you imagined as a victory for yourself, as penance for what you’ve endured, is something that would make anyone angry.” Will squeezes once. “Mason Verger is someone who delights in violence and suffering. He’s a physical sadist, yes. But mostly he’s a psychological one. He *loves* seeing people squirm.”

Will’s eyes narrow. His hand falls away, and he takes a single step forward as he meets Gideon’s eyes. *“Don’t* let him see you squirm, Doctor Gideon. You’re a better man than Mason Verger, and he does *not* deserve the satisfaction of your fury.”

Will watches him until he’s sure Gideon has absorbed his words. Then, he turns. Picks up another glass from the table for Hannibal, and inhales serenity before he turns back. There are words poised on the tip of his tongue—

Gideon watches him with a narrow-eyed, considering expression, and Will stops. Blinks. Waits. “You know,” he says at long last. “I was having difficulty placing it for a while. I think it’s been throwing me off because you’ve done it as long as I’ve known you. But sometimes you talk, and I swear it’s Hannibal’s words coming straight out of your mouth.”

Will’s jaw snaps shut. His teeth clutch together, and he forces a small, tight smile as that sentence strikes his heart. The words might be pretty, and the sound might be similar, but it’s not Hannibal’s mind that Will is wrapped in right now. Not at all. Wilhelmina lazily looks out at Abel Gideon and finds him as lacking as she ever has—but even she is not the cunning whisper in his ear, the invisible weight of shadowed hands upon his shoulders.

But Will does not belong to the Chesapeake Ripper tonight.

Will takes a small, demure sip from his glass, and inclines his head. “I think I’ll part from you here, Abel. I have to get back to Hannibal. But I hope I’ve helped.”

Gideon takes a slow, steady breath and gazes out at the milling masses. “You have.” Sips slowly. Like Will, he turns back and snags a second glass that is unmistakably for Annalise. Raises it in a sardonic salute. “At least for now.”

Will nods. “Mason will get his due someday. He can’t escape the things he does forever. Sooner or later they’ll catch up to him.” Will, too, turns his gaze back to the crowd. “So try not to think about him. The night’s almost over. You should try to enjoy it if you can.”

“Yeah, we’ll see.” Gideon huffs quietly, but manages a small smile. “See you ‘round, Graham. I’ll be in touch if I hear anything about that, uh. Guy at the club.”

“Appreciate it.” Will steels himself to cut back through. “Good luck to us both.”

“Yep.”

He loses himself in the throng. Navigating with two open glasses isn’t easy, but fortunately Will’s footwork is better than average. There’s a certain irritation that he shakes off as he lets himself feel the music around him, as he heads back to Hannibal.

Hannibal.

Will’s teeth sink into his lower lip. Heat pools in his belly. Tonight has the potential to go any one of several ways, the most desirable of which ends with this tension between them finally sated. Will’s heart thumps in his chest, blood thick with anticipation and desire.

He wants this. But if he wants it, he’s going to have to ask.

Such a simple thing to say. *I want to go home with you.* But Will has never had to ask before. Following the incident on the Beltway, Hannibal had all but demanded it of him—but that was for Will’s health and safety, and to soothe his own worries. It had been for the sake of soothing their hurts, wrapping their wounds. That it had led to a metamorphosis in their relationship was unexpected at the time.

This is decidedly… different. If it comes to pass, premeditated. But the idea of going back to his *own* house is unthinkable. Painful, after all the days they’ve already spent apart in the name of Will preparing himself for this night. Making himself ready, making himself *better*, all for Hannibal.

Will pauses in the crowd. Sighs softly. “Fuck.”

He’s going to have to do it. Only the knowledge that it’ll be worth it can soothe his frazzled nerves. He knows Hannibal will look after him, take care of him. Satisfy him. And should this night end with Will spread out in Hannibal’s bed the way he’s hoped for, then a little embarrassment now is deserving of the reward.

This is what he wants. His choice to make. His to give. His to have. The end of the evening is in sight, and nothing short of Hannibal’s refusal will stop Will from getting his desire.

And Will knows he won’t refuse.

“Good luck to us both,” Will mutters again, and this time, his words are not for Gideon.

He weaves through a field of strangers, so different and so much louder than the fields behind his little house. Will keeps his ears keen for a voice he knows. A voice he loves.

When Will hears him, it takes a moment to recognize, if only because Hannibal is embroiled in yet another foreign language conversation—this one, in French. But finally laying eyes on him, even with such a short separation, is like a deep breath of cold winter air; shocking, refreshing, invigorating, and Will sighs. Smiles. Works his way through the last of the roadblocks between them as he approaches from behind and puts himself at Hannibal’s side, graciously returning Eloise Komeda’s smile.

He’s reluctant to interrupt, especially when so many of the people surrounding Hannibal seem to be listening and understanding and nodding along, so Will gently taps him on the arm; a cue that is hopefully polite enough that it won’t interrupt the flow of conversation. Indeed, Hannibal’s attention is drawn, though he does not stop speaking; the cadence of his voice is soothing, even if Will doesn’t understand the words. His French is rusty at best, and tinged with the Cajun influences of his Southern raising. Whatever Hannibal is speaking of is surely far removed from that.

But he smiles, and something in his expression softens in a way that lances Will through the chest. Hannibal’s fingers close around Will’s as he finishes his sentence. He does not fully change gears, as the thickness of his accent attests to, as he absently murmurs, “Thank you, beloved.”

Will’s heart stops.

Eloise’s eyes widen, and suddenly the crowd around them focuses on Will with renewed interest. It takes a moment before Hannibal, too, goes still and silent. Turns his attention suddenly and wholly to Will with parted lips, a flicker of stunned dismay seated deep in the amber-red of his irises.

The silence lingers. Will cannot find words. Hannibal says nothing at all as he slowly closes his mouth and exhales so very softly through his nose. His eyes are intense, piercing, as he meets Will’s gaze, and Will is run through with fierce hope and anxiety, both evenly matched.

If his heart doesn’t pick back up soon, Will’s certain he’ll die. But it doesn’t have permission to start again, or to break in earnest, until he knows if Hannibal really—

He smiles. Small, self-deprecating. Hidden inside his expression is the faintest thread of distress, but also something that Will might almost call worry. Tentative, perhaps. Hesitant, and hopeful as he. Hannibal reaches for Will’s free hand, takes it in his own, and laces their fingers together.

Will’s heart starts again, rapid-fire. Pounding. Pours every feeling inside him through this simple join of their bodies, the electricity between their skin. He can’t breathe. The sound of his pulse fills his ears, and he’s sure his hand shakes as he squeezes back once, twice, thrice.

I love you.

A new light crosses Hannibal's face. Brightens him to the point of radiance; an emergence of creases around his eyes, and a sudden, genuine smile, as though he'd heard the words clear as day.

Without letting go of Will's desperate grip, Hannibal holds out his champagne glass to the Frenchman he'd been speaking to. Murmurs something to him, and then announces to the group in good humor, "It seems as though I've had quite enough."

A round of appreciative chuckles. Will, too, cannot help a breathless laugh.

Elated. Destroyed and remade in a second.

Will turns his eyes to these nameless, unimportant others, and meets the gaze of Eloise Komeda. Whatever she sees in him, she clearly understands—she steps in at once to commandeer the conversation based upon whatever thread Hannibal had left dangling. She shares a silent exchange of eyes with Hannibal, and inclines her head back to Will, and—

"Hannibal," Will says urgently, and tugs at his hand. Impolite. Impatient. "Can I borrow you for a minute?"

Hannibal nods once, sharply, and allows Will to tug him away.

Will goes. Places his champagne glass on a table as he passes, pulls him just far enough away that they can duck behind the shadow of one massive stone pillar. Will turns. His hands meet Hannibal's chest, their eyes meet and clash, and Will backs him up against granite or marble or whatever the hell it is. He doesn't care. He surges up on his toes and threads his fingers into Hannibal's hair, brings their mouths together for a desperate kiss that does not pause to suffer worries of propriety or decency. It is only when their tongues touch and slide, so sweet and slick, that the full feeling in Will's chest breaks free in the form of a helpless moan.

He takes. Indulges. Shivers as Hannibal's palms close around his ribs, his waist, and hold tight enough that Will feels his bones could crack. He doesn't fear it; if Hannibal breaks him, Will knows he would never forgive himself. But bruises, though—Will is glad to sweetly suffer whatever bruises Hannibal deigns to give him.

Will pulls away just as suddenly, and a thin filament of their shared saliva joins their mouths. Hannibal's eyes are rapt on him. Ravenous.

There are so many things Will should say.

Instead, he pushes up again to kiss away that gleaming thread, and his hands slide down Hannibal's throat, over his chest and lapels, follow buttons down his belly. Settle on his hips as Will leans forward to bring their bodies together, both hot and half-hard with arousal and intrigue.

This has been a long time coming. And, Will decides, tonight is more than long enough.

Will murmurs into his mouth, "Take me home, Hannibal."

His hands convulse, tighten. Some half-formed bitten-off sound is captured behind his sharp teeth that might be a moan, but sounds like a growl, and Will's belly drops out.

Will whispers, "*Please."*

Hannibal uses his grip on Will to push him a step back, gently but firmly. His tongue darts out to touch his lips, to lick the taste of Will's mouth away, and Will's knees nearly give out. His eyes are dark and deep and endless as he exhales hard. Steadies himself, and visibly resists pulling Will back to him, unknowing that Will would let him if he did.

He nods once. Swallows. "I'll get our coats," he says. "Do you remember Margot's ticket number?"

"Seven-eighty-two," Will replies, and too, swallows. Is stricken with his own foolishness. "I need to say goodbye to her. Get my phone. God I—are you even ready to leave—"

"Will, if I had the keys to my car, we would already be gone." He blazes with heat. Will's jaw snaps shut as Hannibal reels him in, and falters with a gasp as lips drag over his temple, press hot against the shell of his ear. "Say your goodbyes, my love. I'll meet you at the door."

Will whines at the sudden clench of his heart. The sound he makes can be described as nothing else, and Hannibal hisses softly between his teeth.

"The things you do to me," he murmurs. "Will. Go."

"Okay," Will whispers. "Okay, okay, okay."

They separate, and Will doesn't look back, because he can't. If he does, he'll never leave, and in this moment, the only thing he wants is to get the hell out of here.

First things first: find Margot.

But it's only as he's passing through the crowd that someone snags him by the arm that is decidedly *not* Margot.

"Will," Jack Crawford says. "I'm glad I caught you alone—"

"Jack," Will near-snarls. "We talked about this. I'm trying to leave." Jack's frown darkens into a scowl. Will wrenches his arm away, though stays put to hear him out, anxiously scanning the crowd for a flash of red and jewel-tones. "Make it quick."

"I need your insight on the evidence from the Press Club case," Jack says quietly, in a rush. "I can get you the files, I need to know where you want them sent that will be secure."

Will's gaze returns to him. Secure? Nowhere. And the thought of a file drop with FBI-confidential documents in a Starbucks is nearly laughable—

Will stops still. Blinks, and looks up. "I have a contact. Law enforcement. Would you release the files to them? They'll get them to me safely."

Jack's eyes narrow. "You have eyes and ears in law enforcement?"

Will scans the crowd again and sets his jaw. "It's a recent development. Will you or won't you?" He owes Miriam, anyway. Getting her an in with the FBI would be more than a return on her investment in Will.

Jack sighs. He does *not* sound happy about it, but Will is too busy buzzing with sensation to give a good goddamn. "Get me their contact information."

"I will," he says. "Thanks."

Will turns to go. He stops.

Something is itching at him, and the answer materializes in his memory quickly—it's that fucking silver Chevy, the only remaining question mark. An itch that demands to be scratched, if only to find out that it was nothing at all.

It's probably nothing. But he has to be sure.

Will turns back. "I want a list of all the vehicles catalogued in the Press Club parking structure for the twenty-four hours surrounding the murder. Can you get me that? And whatever else you've got."

Jack tilts his head. "Consider it done." His eyes linger on Will. "It was a surprise, seeing you here with Doctor Lecter. Seems a bit coincidental, given the intel you procured from Johns Hopkins."

Will bares his teeth in an immediate and fearsome snarl. "Hannibal had *nothing* to do with that. Don't you get him involved in this, Jack. He is the *one—"* Will's voice breaks. "The *only* good thing I have."

Jack stares at him for a time. Pieces the ferocity of Will's words with the epiphany granted that night in the diner. Then, slowly, he nods. "Don't keep me waiting, Will. Get me the contact. I'll send you the info, you get me your intel."

Will bristles, and his nostrils flare. He doesn't bother to say goodbye, and pushes aggressively into the crowd.

He doesn't have time for this. And he is *not* about to let Jack Crawford ruin this night.

But he can't find Margot anywhere.

"Come on," Will mutters to himself as he scans the mass of strangers fruitlessly. "Come on, come on. Where the hell—" he pauses, and whips around. Heads in the direction of the women's restrooms. Will takes a breath before he rounds the corner and softens the tension he feels. Bleeds away the worry about Jack Crawford, and the frenetic energy Hannibal has left him vibrating with.

Will slips past the attendant at the powder room door. He is not disappointed, but pleasantly surprised (and exasperated) to find Margot and Alana comfortably ensconced within: tucked in the corner of the lavish resting suite on one of the small settees, consumed with kisses and one another.

"Margot," Will says, and feels only the briefest pang of sympathy when she startles badly. She is smudged with Alana's lipstick, starry-eyed and pink-cheeked. Alana, for her part, looks rather pleased with herself, and Margot is quick to relax once she realizes who is looking for her.

"Will, honey," she says with a smile—and immediately picks up on his tension. "What is it? What's going on?"

For a moment, the reality of it is boggling. Will stands in the center of the powder room, uncertain of what to say. A bit helpless, really. Speechless. "I, um." He swallows. "I'm going home." His eyes flicker to Alana. "With Hannibal."

Margot's expression is one of blatant satisfaction. "Oh, thank god," she says, and reaches for her clutch, which rests beside the settee on the floor. "You need your phone, right? Do you need the coat tag?"

“No, Hannibal’s getting them. I told him which one,” Will replies in a rush. Approaches. Winces his apology, but sits on those bare few inches of space remaining at the foot of the seat. “Margot.”

She pauses, mid-extraction, with Will’s newly-replaced cell in her hand. She looks at him wordlessly, attention darting from eye to eye as she reads him. “That’s a good *Margot* noise, right? Tell me it’s a good one.”

Will is breathless as he starts to laugh. Bends at the waist, and places his forehead against his knees. Even Alana reaches out to worriedly pat his back until Will straightens back up, and meets their eyes. “He called me *beloved.* He loves me.”

Alana smiles sweetly. Margot looks incredibly smug. “I told you, goofball. Your own fault you didn’t believe me.”

Alana gives her a gentle, chiding push, and offers Will a smile that is equally smudged with red lipstick. “That’s really sweet, Will. I’m happy for you both.”

Will snorts. It’s a helpless thing. Looks between them, and accepts his phone when Margot hands it to him. Clutches it tight. “I’m happy for you guys, too. Really, I’m. I’m really happy.”

Margot reaches for his hand. For a moment, they squeeze one another’s fingers, and then the reality of how much time has passed catches up to Will. Minutes, surely, but too many minutes. Any amount of time away from Hannibal now is too much. “I have to go. He’s waiting for me.”

“Then go, honey!” Margot commands, and gives him an encouraging push. “Go, go. Text me tomorrow when you’re conscious again. Or after round two. Or three. Whatever.”

Will chokes. Laughs. God.

God.

He stands on shaky legs. “Yeah, I. Yeah.”

“Good luck,” Alana says softly. “And thank you, Will.”

“Yeah,” he breathes. “You guys too. I. Okay.”

They laugh as he goes, but as Will rounds the corner and takes long strides toward the entryway, phone clutched tightly in his hand, he is doing anything but laughing. His heart has started to race. His blood is on fire. There is one thought in his mind, and one only. One desire.

He *wants.* Now, he’s going to *have.*

“Will.”

He turns immediately toward the sound of Hannibal’s voice. “I’m here.”

His smile is a flash of light among a golden corridor, his form tall and dark and imposing in the thick, black overcoat that shields him from the draft of winter air. There’s a scarf around his neck of rich blue wool that is so deep and so bright that Will has never seen it in person; only rendered on high-definition screens. It looks soft. Fine. But Will doesn’t look at it for more than a second when Hannibal himself is before him.

Hannibal's eyes are half-lidded with intent, each movement purposeful as he unfolds Will's borrowed coat from over his arm and holds the lapels open—for him to help Will into, he realizes in a rush of pleasure. A true and proper gentleman, assisting Will with putting his coat on.

Will approaches and turns; casts a glance back over his shoulder, and Hannibal fills the vacant space there with strong and sure hands and the heat of his body. Will slips his hands through the sleeves, shrugs it on; exhales shakily when Hannibal's arms slip around his waist from behind, and his chin settles on Will's shoulder as he does the buttons up one by one.

"This coat has always looked better on you than it does on me," Hannibal murmurs. "But it would please me immensely to see you in a new one. Something fitted, I think. I'm undecided if I should put you in a solid color or some sort of print. I might not decide until I see you in both." Will gasps as Hannibal presses a chaste, lingering kiss to the gap in the oversized collar, lips brushing Will's carotid artery. He inhales with reverence as his fingers slowly ascend. His palms linger on Will's stomach, and Will is too weak to resist leaning back into him. "Would you indulge me, Will?"

"Yeah," Will gasps, because he's pretty fucking sure he'd promise anything right now. "I—yeah, if you want."

Hannibal chuckles. Hums to himself as he smooths and straightens the collar, and Will arches into his hands. "No complaints? No protests?"

Will bites back a whimper. Whispers instead, "No."

Hannibal's fingers find the belt and tug, tighten it so very slowly around Will's waist until it feels more like a noose around his throat. "Good."

"Hannibal," Will says, the barest shiver of breath.

"Give me your phone," Hannibal says, and holds out his hand. Will places it in his palm, and whines outright when Hannibal slides it into Will's pocket.

"God. This isn't fair," Will says, and loses himself in rough, jagged laughter that cuts off when Hannibal nuzzles at his temple, sensual and affectionate. "Fuck."

"Language, Will," Hannibal replies, quietly teasing, but withdraws all the same. Will is freezing with the loss of him, and is bereft when he turns around—

He falls silent as Hannibal loosens the scarf from around his neck and loops it around Will's; it's warm from sitting so close to his pulse, and smells fantastically of him. Will exhales fully and adjusts his nose into the curls of it; inhales Hannibal's scent from the closest thing to the source, and feels his insides clench and pulse with want.

Will sighs deeply, a sound that is almost a moan. Almost, but not quite. "You're so cruel."

In the vacant entryway to the old stone hall, the sound of chamber music and cars on Baltimore streets equidistant, they stand between this phase of their lives and the next. Both know what is coming. Desire it equally. And yet, each suspended moment of time between now and then begs to be savored —as does this.

Hannibal is a wraith, fiercely handsome despite his hemmed edges pulling apart at the seams, leaving him raw. Unfinished. This moment, too, is unfinished. All that remains are the pins to set it in place, and the final surge to anchor their lives together.

Hannibal reaches out with one hand—bare, not encased in his soft leather gloves. No, right now, Will can see he prefers the sensation of skin-to-skin. As their hands entwine, he knows for certain that he does, too.

“And even so,” Hannibal says, his voice a lilting caress that tilts up with something that is not quite a question, “regardless, you love me.”

There is no hesitance in his expression, but there is a glimmer of it in his eyes. Will would see it ground out under the weight of surety, and so he does.

“I do,” Will replies.

Hannibal rumbles with a prideful man’s vindication. Primal satisfaction, knowing he has caught the object of his desire, a chase hard-fought and well-won.

Inside him, Wilhelmina lifts her head and gazes outward. Sees Hannibal, and shifts restlessly with the longing to return his call.

Maybe Will is denying his destiny by choosing Hannibal. Maybe he is. But even if the Ripper were to happen upon them now and interrupt this final push, Will would deny him. Would tear him apart with his bare hands for presuming to know his heart.

Hannibal is what he wants. The one he loves. And Will is determined to finally, finally have him.

“Take me home,” Will says. "Now."

He does not ask.

Chapter End Notes

Reblog to save an author.

AAAAnd I'm sure we can all figure out what's coming next. :3

2:15

Chapter Notes

I have no idea how I'm awake right now, only that I am, and please just take this behemoth of a chapter. Thank you so much for all your comments, I swear I'm gonna reply to all of them soon, I am just going nuts with business and moving and whatnot!!

That said, I am taking a hiatus until October so I can pack and because my work schedule is changing to accommodate losing a coworker. I didn't want to have to do this, but I just have too many responsibilities as it turns out, so I have to bite the bullet and put my adult life first. I'll be back in October if all goes according to plan, and you can always check in on my Tumblr (same username) for updates. <3

This chapter is very, very NSFW. It's also like 15k on the dot of NSFW. Have fun.

Edit: due to RL circumstances, including but not limited to me physically moving, Fannibalfest, and my boss having a baby, the new plan is to be back for the third or fourth week of October (on or around 10/20 or the week following). I'm so very sorry to push back another chapter so far, but I think it's the most realistic expectation for myself amidst international travel and picking up extra shifts at work to cover while training a new employee. Please forgive me!! I'll try my best to make the next one very worth the wait!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The air inside the Bentley is charged. Thick. It crackles across Will's skin like bubbly champagne sent carbonation climbing the insides of the fine flutes at the gala. Will leans his head back and slouches in the passenger's seat with an assumed air of carelessness, mind at war with itself. Within one half, anxiety. But in the other half, certainty.

He jumps and shivers when Hannibal's cool fingers brush his thigh, tangible even through layers of tulle. The boldness of the move startles him until Will realizes that what Hannibal is reaching for is his hand, folded in his lap. Will acquiesces to Hannibal's searching grip and sighs softly when his knuckles are drawn to Hannibal's mouth for a slow, lingering kiss.

"Before we get home, mylimasis, I feel I should make sure you know that I expect nothing from you. If at any point you should change your mind about what you do or don't desire, I will respect your wishes without complaint. My first and foremost priority is your comfort."

Will's eyes slide to him, bridged by the connection of their hands and back up again. "I know, Hannibal," he replies. It feels as though his pulse simultaneously speeds and slows as those words nestle in his heart and take root, sprout, grow, bloom. "I trust you."

Hannibal's eyes find him in the passing glow of a street light. For a second, his eyes are illuminated red. "Do you?"

Will averts his gaze; stares out the car window and the moon hanging ripe in the dark winter sky. “With my heart, yes,” Will admits. “And my body. I trust you to take care of me.”

“And I would do so gladly,” Hannibal replies. His voice is low, almost lost beneath the hum of the wheels, as he holds Will’s hand atop the Bentley’s center console. “But I hope you know I mean it genuinely, Will. Whatever you want from tonight will be yours, even if it is nothing more illicit than a nightcap and a goodnight kiss.”

Will smiles at that. Looks back to Hannibal with a wry, affectionate curl to his lips. He knows that more than anything, Hannibal wants him to be comfortable. It means a great deal, even if the sentiment is misplaced. He might be nervous, but Will knows what he wants. It’s the same thing he’s wanted for weeks, has thought about alone in bed at night—Hannibal’s last-minute assurances won’t unnerve him.

His lashes lower. The smile remains. Will tips his head back against the seat, and feels his confidence renewed at the way Hannibal’s eyes linger on the glimpse of his pale throat beneath the rich blue wool of the scarf. Hannibal isn’t fooling him; Will knows damn well that these genteel and considerate assurances, while genuine, are primarily performative. He’s covering his bases out of necessity, despite knowing they both want the same thing. Hannibal’s platitudes are comforting, but only in the sense that Will has absolutely no desire to heed them.

Will’s breath catches in his throat as he tugs Hannibal’s hand closer, rests it atop his thigh, and gently presses down until his palm spreads warm and wide over layers of translucent tulle. The pressure is a tease; the distant warmth is an itch that begs to be scratched. Still, no reason to rush. This slow burn will catch fire tonight one way or another. “Then why don’t we start with the nightcap and see where the night takes us?”

Hannibal’s hand twitches; for a second, his grip tightens to something strong, something possessive, before it smooths back to patient acquiescence. When Will steals a glance at him, Hannibal’s eyes just *burn* as he keeps his focus deliberately on the road. Not far now from his home, no, and the moon is bright and high in the sky, their evening only just beginning.

No matter. Wilhelmina paces restlessly beneath his skin, determined and desirous as he. The tension in Hannibal’s body is nearly painful to witness; a coiled spring on the verge of snapping. He’s only a man, after all, and Will wants to see him break, just once. To know he is the cause of Hannibal’s loss of composure.

Just… reduce him to instinct. Will wants that.

“That sounds reasonable.” Hannibal says, carefully measured not to reveal too much or too little.

Yeah, Will figures he’s probably off to a pretty good start.

That otherness that grasped him at the gala has followed him home. Will stares up at the fire-lit warmth of Hannibal’s study and feels *different* than he has before. In his mind, he is no longer a guest here; Hannibal’s care for him soaks into every wall, every couch and chair and antique, every threshold, and makes this his domain. It doesn’t matter that Will knows otherwise, and that his home is miles away, across state lines. Hannibal lives here, and Hannibal loves him, and so it feels like *his*.

It's Wilhelmina's doing; inherently territorial and sensual creature that she is, she settles beside him in his mind. She's close to the surface tonight, informing Will's movements, his thoughts. In this, their wants are the same.

Will is barefoot in his fine formalwear as he stands before the fireplace. In the disparity of his feet against chilled hardwood and the crackling warmth that spreads across the floor and over his exposed toes, there lingers a certain disregard for propriety. The golden light that filters through the open doorway from the nearby kitchen is the marking of a more civilized and refined place.

Here in the dark, Will feels visceral and raw.

Despite the couches and chairs, Will kneels before the hearth. Silk and tulle pool on the floor around his legs. Like this, the heat from the fire can flow into him directly. Violently. In only minutes, Will's legs and chest will feel hot to the touch from his near proximity, but in this moment, he is embraced by the warmth.

Will reaches back to unclasp the hair piece Margot leant him and sets it on the floor; winds his fingers through his curls in search of invisible bobby pins, which he extracts one by one. His hair has gotten longer in these last few months: where it used to barely brush his collar bones, it now touches the base of his shoulder blades, a cascade of curls made smooth by Margot's careful grooming. Freed from the elegant updo, Will's hair feels soft to the touch. He pulls it forward to extract the last of the clips, exposing the vulnerable nape of his neck to the ambient chill, rapidly retreating.

He pauses for only a moment when he feels eyes upon him. Will doesn't turn, but he smiles. "You don't have to stand in the doorway, you know. I'm not going to attack you. I have *some* tact."

Footsteps fall behind him, approaching. Will's lashes lower, and he tilts his head to expose his neck in the silent hope for a kind touch; hums his content when Hannibal's chilled fingertips brush the side of his throat. He stands behind Will, a looming shadow. "You misunderstand, Will. I'm not apprehensive. At the risk of sounding cliche, I wanted a moment to commit to memory the sight of you here."

When that touch returns, it's the cold flash of a glass against his skin; Will huffs a laugh and flinches away from the whiskey-filled tumbler that touches the exposed crest of his shoulder. He reaches up to take it instead, and finally leans back until his spine touches Hannibal's legs, until he looks at Hannibal upside-down, gazing just as intently down at him. "I've been here before."

Will knows why this is different. From the wry smile that lifts Hannibal's lips, he is equally aware of that. "Never looking as you do right now," Hannibal says. "Never with me knowing what I do now."

Will smiles to himself. He takes a sip from his drink; the whiskey is smooth and warm as it slips down his throat, the scent of it is rich, and Will absently notes the missing complementary scent of woodsmoke. His fireplace at home is old, cast iron, wood-burning. Hannibal's is much more modern: metal and glass, gas-powered with a simple ignition switch. It's elegant, less temperamental than a wood fire. There's a certain symmetry in that, Will believes. A fire at his front, Hannibal at his back, and the liquor settling in his gut—Hannibal is as controlled as ever, while Will is primed and prepared to burn.

Will leans back against him, takes a breath, and gently sighs. His heart thunders against the insides of his ribs, affection rooted so deeply inside that Will's no longer sure it isn't a part of his soul. "Does it change the way I look to you?"

Hannibal hums. "Does what?"

Will bites back a snort. It seems playing coy doesn't suit either of them. But the admission itself is hard to give words to, even when the truth of it is already known. His voice softens. His lashes lower. Will takes another sip of his whiskey to settle his nerves. He murmurs, "Knowing I'm in love with you."

There's a second of silence in which Hannibal does not breathe. For a moment, the only sounds Will can hear are the gentle *whoosh* of the gas fireplace and the rhythmic pounding of his own heart.

When Hannibal's fingers slip into his hair, Will is helpless to do anything but lean back into his caress —the subtle painless scritch of fingernails against his scalp, brushing the nape of his neck, the sensitive hollows behind his ears. A fluttering moan of pleasure and encouragement slips from his chest at the familiarity and comfort of it, and he could not summon embarrassment if he tried.

When he speaks, Hannibal's voice is a quiet, wanting growl. "I see you no differently," he says. "You have always been exquisitely beautiful in my eyes. Rather, my awareness sweetens every inch of the world around you. It doesn't change you, Will. Your love is the catalyst that transforms everything else. Right now, I find myself content in a way I have rarely felt since childhood."

When Will cracks his eyes open with surprise that they have fallen closed, Hannibal watches him with such rapt, deep attention that Will cannot help but flush under the force of his gaze. Turns his face in a fruitless attempt to nuzzle at the wrist he can't quite reach, but Hannibal rewards his attempt with another slow stroke through his hair. "You're not alone in that feeling," Will replies softly.

Hannibal's fingers curl. Tighten. Will's breath goes soft and shallow at the quiet possessiveness of it. "If, as you said, we're both alone without each other, then the inverse must also be true."

Head tipped back and held fast in place, Will takes a sip of his whiskey regardless. He's vindicated that his hand doesn't tremble too badly. Perhaps something about watching the attempt makes Hannibal realize his grip, for it loosens despite the fact that Will doesn't struggle, soothes with gentle touches despite a lack of complaint.

Will still feels breathless. Regardless, he breathes. Sighs, "If we have one another, we'll be whole. Complete."

The words feel right, even if a quiet, persistent ache in his heart reminds him that if he gives himself to Hannibal, the Ripper's love will go unanswered. Unfulfilled. He'll be responsible for breaking the heart of an artist whose work salvaged what was left of Will's sanity upon introducing him to the intricacies of death.

But Hannibal is so very vibrantly *alive.* Even now, the call of his warmth against Will's back is magnetic. Will wants him so badly that even this is affecting him, arousal making itself known with a single pang in his belly—the starts of something much more, much stronger, irresistible.

"Do I complete you, Will?" Hannibal murmurs.

"More than I thought any decent person ever could." It's honesty in its most raw form. It's the best Will has to offer while Wilhelmina purrs her amusement; she reflects herself through Will's eyes. He gazes up at Hannibal and sees intent there. Oh, but he has intent of his own. A slow smirk takes control of his lips, and Will smiles. "I'll let you know how thoroughly once I've had you."

Hannibal's pupils dilate in the low light; his hand slips from Will's hair to traverse the curve of his jaw, brush over Will's lower lip. It's a reflection of a different moment—once, it was Hannibal on his

knees before him, given the liberty to touch, to learn. Now, it's Will's lips that part, painted with the moisture of whiskey and saliva by the pad of Hannibal's thumb as it dips inside to touch his teeth.

And despite this, his position relative to Hannibal's commanding stance, it is the most powerful Will has ever felt in his company. Fierce pride illuminates the darker crevices of his soul as he nips the side of Hannibal's knuckle; his smile widens at the flicker of something deep and dark across Hannibal's eyes, the firm grip on his chin that he gets in response.

He lets himself be held by it. Turns into it. Rests his cheek against Hannibal's thigh, and takes a long, challenging sip as he maintains eye contact. He knows damn well he's at eye level with the soft swell at the front of Hannibal's pants; the scent of fine wool and whiskey and aftershave and that gentle undercurrent of arousal makes him dizzy. Will swallows whiskey in the name of swallowing down the building moisture in his mouth.

A rumble starts in Hannibal's chest, whether warning or pleased, Will can't be sure. He only knows that Hannibal reaches over with his occupied hand to place his drink on the table beside the couch, then holds out his hand for Will's. Curious, he obliges—and blinks slowly when Hannibal's touch changes; he cups Will's cheek, and then offers both hands to help him stand.

Will's not sure at what point he'll stop being surprised by Hannibal's strength; maybe it has something to do with the unexpectedness of being lifted like he's nothing by a man wearing a couture tuxedo, but considering he's also been carried and held up against a wall in equal turns, he should probably know better. Regardless, he laughs with breathless elation as Hannibal hauls him up and catches him around the waist, noses at Will's hair and nibbles at the shell of his ear in a sharp twinge of recompense.

"Dangerous thing," he says. "You challenge me. You delight me. I resent that you made me realize that I was not as complete as I believed before I met you."

It's one of the reasons Will likes him, really—the way Hannibal puts words to sensations he feels but has never known how to express. It's an awful feeling, the anticipation of dread at losing something that makes him so happy. Something that, under different circumstances, he never would have known he was missing.

Will touches his chest, his belly, and undoes the buttons of his brocade suit jacket and waistcoat beneath. It's slow like this, heated nuzzling just shy of kisses as Will pushes his hands up beneath the lapels, over the smooth black cotton of his shirt until he reaches Hannibal's shoulders. Beneath the layers, Hannibal radiates heat, a furnace trapped in finery.

Will turns toward Hannibal's seeking lips, fits their mouths together with careful teeth and whiskey tongues. Gasps as Hannibal licks into his mouth, holds Will close by the waist and the hip so their bodies slot together.

"Off," Will says breathlessly, and pushes at the confines of Hannibal's vest and jacket. "You're overdressed."

Will purrs as Hannibal disobeys, as his hands roam the expanse of Will's back and sides before he finally, reluctantly withdraws. His chuckle is warm and soft as he shrugs out of the jacket, rounds the edge of his desk to lay them over the back of his office chair. It's a much-needed breather, but one that leaves Will clenching his hands at his sides to prevent himself from reaching out. Begging. Demanding.

Regardless, Hannibal watches him like he knows, blown-black pupils and a soft flush to his mouth, fingers dexterous as he undoes his bow tie and places it in a neat coil on the desktop. He sighs with something like relief as he undoes the top two buttons of his collar; Will's heart picks up speed, but Hannibal undresses himself no further. Stripped from his colorful outer layers, he is left a figure in solid black. His hands curl over the back of the office chair, and he makes no move to approach—he leaves space between them that is nearly unbearable. The desk. The couch on its other side. Will, left drifting and unmoored in the open area opposite it all. His only tether is the force of Hannibal's eyes on him, slowly sliding down.

"I would accuse you of the same, mylimasis," Hannibal replies with a clever smirk and heated gaze, "but I know I have only one layer to strip you from, and I intend to savor it."

Will stares back. Feels blood pool in his cheeks at the blatant implication, but—

—that's not quite true, is it?

Emboldened, Will holds out one hand: an invitation. A flash of a frown crosses Hannibal's brow, but in the end, he's a slave to his curiosity. He moves like a wraith through the flickers of firelight, takes Will's hand in his own, and in the moment Will turns in his arms and exposes his back, he sees something ravenous staring out at him.

He shivers as he pulls his hair forward and over his shoulder. Like this, he knows the seam for the gown's concealed zipper is visible to those who know what to look for. As a connoisseur of the finer things, Hannibal will know.

"Will," he says so very softly. His fingers brush the back of Will's neck and the tender skin there with simple appreciation, rather than any intent to bare him further. "Perhaps you would be more comfortable if we moved upstairs?"

Will inhales slowly. Sets his eyes on the fire. Knows he could let Hannibal lead him, guide this night to its inevitable conclusion with all the control and patience he's shown thus far.

But Will doesn't want him controlled. Will wants him to *ache.* And more importantly, he wants to take his time.

"Not yet," Will murmurs, and smiles when Hannibal's touch freezes in place. He waits, but those dexterous fingers do not move. Will's not even sure he's still breathing. "Hannibal."

He nearly jumps when Hannibal's nose brushes his neck. Inhales slowly, takes in the bouquet of them together, a fine wine steeped with reverence. "Yes," he whispers.

Will obligingly tips his head just slightly forward, making room for Hannibal at his back. "Are you going to unzip me, or am I going to have to do it myself?"

He huffs. The sound of it is not quite a laugh; too breathless for that. "Could you?"

"Do it myself?" Will asks. At his assenting hum, admits, "Not gracefully, but I could manage." He glances back over his shoulder, and meets only the endless depths of desire reflected back at him. He wonders how deeply Hannibal can see into his own. "But I want you to do it." Holds that contact, even as Hannibal sways closer. Even as Will's lashes dip, and their mouths are separated only by breath. "Savor it."

He moans softly as Hannibal steals a kiss, as he finds the zipper and drag it down bit by bit. His fingertips smooth over each inch of exposed skin, raising gooseflesh in his path. Down, down, down, until—

The zipper terminates at the middle of Will's spine, where the waistline of the bodice flows into the skirt. Where, when the halves of the dress split, it exposes a band of satin and lace—soft to the touch, and unmistakably other. Hannibal hesitates at it. Brushes it with his knuckles, and in that scant scrap of space below the chest band where Will is not yet fully stripped. He shudders hard; his belly drops out at the newness of it, the swell of his cock still hidden beneath the layers of silk and tulle, soft satin underwear that slip against his skin. He's flayed like a nerve, his outer shell cracked open. It's not so unlike the way he stripped Hannibal down, but only one of them is still fully dressed, and it's certainly not Will. Their balance of power has once more shifted, leaving the advantage squarely in Hannibal's hands.

There's no going back, even if Will wanted to.

Will slips his arms from the sheer sleeves and lets the bodice lose its shape, puddling around his waist. The bralette is a deep but vibrant shade of teal, only a few lighter than the gown itself; it hugs Will's pectorals, not quite the right shape to be mistaken for a woman's breasts or a small, pert chest —but Will has no desire to change his body from the way it is, only accentuate it in ways he enjoys. Right now, he's halfway between pleased pride and terrible embarrassment. Under Hannibal's rapt attention, Will's face heats with a flush so dark that he feels burned by it.

It's nothing special. Nothing fancy. It's moderately pretty, with scalloped lace around the band and a floral pattern over the chest, but his options were limited when it came to strapless sets that would not look so oversized on him to be foolish. It's fortunately comfortable, so much softer than the dress had been, and at the time it had seemed like a good idea, but now—

Hannibal's arms encircle him from behind with a rumble that is either a growl or a purr. Maybe it's both. Will's lips part on an exhale as he's pulled back firmly against Hannibal's body, as Hannibal's face tucks into the curve of his neck, lavishing Will's shoulders with kisses, nibbles, flashes of tongue that tease and taste. One hand splays huge and warm over Will's ribcage, dips his thumb beneath the elastic chest band.

Will wonders if Hannibal can feel the way his heart is pounding. He tips his head back, teeth sinking into his lower lip to bite back a moan as Hannibal's hips set flush against against his ass, the telltale firmness of a growing erection tangible through the layers of Will's skirt, the wool of Hannibal's pants.

He inhales. Licks his lips. Folds his hands over the backs of Hannibal's, guides them to where he wants them—the fabric of the bodice, caught around Will's waist and hips, not yet peeled from him fully. He shifts in Hannibal's hold, silent insistence, and huffs an exhale of approval as he's freed from the last of his restrictions, only to go still and silent again when he feels a slow progression of kisses down his spine. The quiet sounds of moving fabric as he kneels. Hannibal's mouth drifting to Will's hip as he exposes the waistband of the panties, little glimpses of skin in the gaps between the band and panels of lace, which hug tight to the curve of Will's ass and the swell of his hardening cock.

Will's head drops forward. The flush spreads down his chest in a wave, and he cannot help but look down and back and meet Hannibal's eyes as he stares up at Will in turn. Helpless, Will slips his fingers into Hannibal's hair, ruffles it and musses it free from the pomade until it's soft and powdery between his fingers; with added moisture, Will knows it'll feel slippery. Slick. Whether that moisture is the water of a shower, or sweat from something decidedly less refined.

They're getting there. This whole ordeal follows a sensual playbook that he can see in Hannibal's eyes, a twenty-step plan that ends with Will in his bed. He follows the next step as Hannibal taps his calf with one finger, a silent signal to step out from the gown now held around Will's ankles. He does; creates some meagre distance between them as he steps forward and away and turns, backlit by firelight, front and center in the spotlight of Hannibal's burning desire.

But here, their plans diverge. Not in form, but in function.

Hannibal has such care for fine things; he stands and retreats, only for a moment, to drape the gown lengthwise over the width of his desk. Everything beneath it is eclipsed by the evidence of Will's presence in his life; his eyes catch the golden glow of the fire and light him up like embers as his hand smooths down the fabric, straightening creases that would form untoward wrinkles, absorbing the tactile sensation in a way that Will has only ever seen Hannibal appreciate. They are, the both of them, a slave to their senses, and God—maybe they are made for each other, because Will is just as helpless to resist the whims of his curious nature.

Their eyes meet. Hold. Both of them, still as stone.

Hannibal's breath is measured, even, as his gaze roves Will's body: loose curls, satin and lace, pale skin stained by a blood-flush that lingers in Will's cheeks and neck and chest, and makes itself known in the shape of his cock, trapped in the confines of his underwear. Will's skin is alight, prickling with warmth and cold and *want.* His mind crackles with sensation, with overstimulation of sight and sound and scent, every sense on overdrive.

He wants to gorge himself on it. On Hannibal.

And if Will's to get what he wants, there's no room to give quarter until he's well and sated. He may be selfish, yes, but that doesn't mean it can't reward them both.

He lifts his head. Inside him, Wilhelmina is a molten stream beneath his skin; her pride in him, her pleasure. She is not a creature of compromise; she is an unyielding force of nature, and whenever Will, too, bids himself to be so is when she is the happiest. He doesn't follow her lead. He simply takes his own.

"Hannibal," he murmurs. Lowers his lashes and straightens his spine, sheds his embarrassment and embraces the greed inherent in his love and lust. "Come here."

He is silent as he moves, closes the distance at the tenor of Will's call. He stops when Will's hand meets his chest. Blinks slowly, and every minutiae of his body is focused and coiled tight. He radiates command and intent, even in his stillness.

Will inhales. Steps close. Smiles just a little, and knows that the moment he closes the distance, without his express say-so, it will be taken for permission—so distance he maintains. Nearly an arm's length between their bodies as Will reaches out with one hand to trace those two undone buttons of Hannibal's collar and drops to touch the third with the smooth gel of his index fingernail, a subtle *click* of pearl button against plastic. Both hands, now, as he undoes the button beneath Hannibal's collar bones. The two down his sternum part to expose his chest hair. One at the base of his ribcage, and two below it that highlight Hannibal's strong core muscles in the flickering light of the flames. The three remaining are tucked into Hannibal's pants, trapped by the confines of his belt, so Will meets his eyes as he unbuckles it. Sees Hannibal's lips part enough for him to inhale through his mouth, teeth still sheathed and safe. His eyes, though, are solely black—no blood-red left for Will to bathe in. The dark fringe of his lashes silhouettes the fine, angular face of a man who has restrained his controlling nature solely for Will's pleasure and for the privilege of his touch, and Will basks in it.

He pulls the leather from Hannibal's belt loops; Will's not as careful as he is, and is too damn impatient to separate them from one another again. He maintains eye contact with a slip of a smile as he drops it and it hits the floor. Hannibal's hands twitch at his sides as Will pulls the tails of his shirt from the waist of his pants to unbutton the last of it. Lets it hang open. Hovers his hand within an inch of Hannibal's belly, so tempted to touch.

And yet.

Will curls his hands in the halves of the shirt, walks Hannibal back until his legs hit the edge of the couch, and Will pushes him gently but insistently. "Sit."

Hannibal's mouth opens wider, but he does not speak—his eyes are glittering and dark, a flash of teeth white in his mouth.

He sits. Parts his legs so Will might step between them, or perhaps to provide some relief to the rigid line of his cock still trapped inside his suit pants. His palms lay flat on the cushion on either side of him, prepared to push himself up, or to reach at a moment's notice. He does neither. He only waits.

Will nudges Hannibal's knee with his own, and revels in the slow, audible breath as Hannibal spreads his thighs further, until the stretch of his cock against his pants is nearly obscene to look at, but Will does. Memorizes it. And then—

Well, if Hannibal wants to savor the sight of Will kneeling, he can do it twice.

He's still now. So very still, but his hands have curled atop the cushion in what is now a clear attempt to keep himself from reaching out. His pupils are not unlike black holes, starving, consuming every sight they can behold and absorbing it for their own, forever to keep.

"Will," he whispers, and says nothing else.

Will huffs. Lifts his arms over Hannibal's legs, and rests them upon his strong thighs, fingertips lingering on his hips and idly playing with his belt loops. He doesn't reach for the fly, though his mouth is wet at the thought of it, and he desperately wants to. Not yet.

"I'm not gonna be good at this," Will says, though he's not bashful about it. It's matter of fact; he's inexperienced, he knows it. "But I want to. Will you let me?"

Hannibal's jaw tenses. His mouth closes and opens again; when he speaks, the strain in his voice is tangible and washes down Will's spine in a wave. "Whatever you desire is yours to have." His lips press together, and he exhales through his nose. "As long as you know you're not obligated—"

Will's nails become claws. He pries the button open and pulls the fabric to safely unzip Hannibal's slacks, but he's not gentle when he wrenches the waistband down his hips and traps it beneath his weight. Will pushes forward, leans into the resistance he's created, and has the absent thought that maybe he'll rip them. He doesn't particularly care. "Shut *up,* Hannibal."

He *wants.* And the idea that this desire is something he'd *subject* himself to solely for Hannibal's benefit is not only wrong, but borders on offensive.

Will curls over his lap and presses his lips to the thick bulge in Hannibal's briefs; embraces his lust and is consumed by it. Hannibal's quiet, closed-mouthed moan sets a fire in his belly that roars to an inferno. Will exhales, hot and damp and wet, and smiles at the pulse and twitch of want beneath his mouth; inhales the scent of Hannibal's arousal, of musk and spice and skin.

The briefs are distended, stretched thin over the shape of Hannibal's cock, wet with fluid where the head is trapped against his abdomen. Will laps at it, drags the flat of his tongue over the cotton to taste the traces of salted smoothness, a certain tang and depth of flavor that is striking, but neither good nor bad.

A growl gets caught halfway through somewhere above him. Will lifts his eyes to Hannibal, finds and holds and locks at the absolutely *incensed* arousal he sees there.

Good.

"You think I want to put my mouth on you out of obligation?" Will snarls, and rubs his cheek against the slickness he's created, careless of makeup or composure or anything but what he wants right here and now. "Like I haven't been thinking about this since that night in your kitchen? Drop the fucking pretense."

He's gentler than he feels when he scratches through the trail of hair that descends Hannibal's stomach and disappears beneath the waistband; he's met with a tensing of muscles, and puts the flat of his tongue to the red lines he raised there. Tastes. Inhales. Nuzzles at Hannibal's belly, despite the trembling in his hands.

"I appreciate it, I do. I know part of you means it. I know part of me wants to hear it. But we're past that."

He forces himself to push past this overwhelming conflux of emotions and sensations, the heaving of his lungs and the thunder of his heart. He knows it's not an insult. He knows it's because Hannibal loves him.

But love isn't always sweet and kind. Will knows *he's* not.

Somewhere inside him, he knows Hannibal isn't, either.

Will peels back the final layer of resistance. Holds the silken heat of Hannibal's cock in his hand, familiar to the touch, but the sight of it is new. He absently wishes he had a hair tie to make his exploration a little easier. The tendrils of his curls drag over Hannibal's legs, jumping and tensing with the electric current of his fraying control, and one more time, Will looks up.

"I know how much you want me. I want you to." Holds the starving void of Hannibal's gaze as he presses a chaste kiss to the base of his shaft. "If I can handle the Chesapeake Ripper, Hannibal, I can handle you."

Hannibal's hands twitch and finally break free of whatever invisible confines he'd resigned himself to. As though he has insight directly to Will's train of thought, his first slow, deliberate touch is to push Will's hair back out of his face, tuck the strands of it behind his ear. His eyes linger there for a moment, on the pretty pearl earrings Will had worn tonight, a silent mark of belonging. Then they find Will's eyes, and he nods, just once.

Will nudges his temple up into Hannibal's palm, affectionately accepting of the silent apology. The lines of tension around Hannibal's eyes soften, though the way he watches Will is no less intense.

Will's heart flutters; he feels visceral, animal, as he nuzzles at Hannibal's cock, lets his lips drift sweetly up the length of it and strokes down over Hannibal's foreskin, and sucks a kiss beneath the slick head of it. Hannibal's hips flex subtly; he swallows once, and exhales hard through his nose. His knuckles drift down the column of Will's throat, and when he places his palm back on the couch,

there's only a telltale twitch to his fingers, rather than the clutching, clawing thing he had been trying to restrain before.

That changes quickly when Will laps at the slit of his cock, wets his palm with saliva and the slick, clear fluid of Hannibal's arousal. The slip of his fist down Hannibal's shaft and the sound it pulls from his lungs makes Will's belly clutch with want. "Fuck," Will breathes, and laughs helplessly. "You feel so good."

Hannibal's head tips back against the couch with a ragged breath. "I could be wrong," he rasps, "But I believe I'm supposed to say that."

Will's lashes lower. He adjusts his balance on his knees and cups Hannibal's sac in his palm, savors the way it makes him sigh. His chest is warm, full, as he sucks at the vein on the underside of Hannibal's shaft, kitten licks at the base of his cock. Grins as he slips back up. Kisses the hot, flushed head, laves it wet and softly moans at the taste.

"Then why haven't you?" he asks, licks his lips, and slips the head over the velvet-soft innards of his cheek and into the cavern of his mouth.

There's something unspeakably intimate about feeling Hannibal's heartbeat on his tongue, slightly hastened, but steady and strong. For that reason alone, Will closes his eyes to savor the sensation. Pushes forward, sucks gently, nurses the taste of him straight from the source. Forward, with the slip of his hand, and back again. Eases himself down a little more each time. Wonders what it would feel like to emulate pornography, though he knows he doesn't have the practice; wonders what it would feel like to hold Hannibal in his throat and feel him come so far past his tongue that he can't taste it anymore. The thought strikes him like lightning, makes him whine and his hips rock fruitlessly. He knows he's going too far, too much, too fast, but he *wants* this, wants to be *good* at this. He forces his mouth down until he gags, until Hannibal curses above him, until hands in his hair guide him back and *off* so Will can cough and sputter, catch his breath.

Hannibal strokes his cheeks, pushes Will's bangs from his eyes. When Will blinks away the reactionary watering, he catches sight of heated cheeks and tousled hair, open concern and arousal warring for dominance on Hannibal's face. "Will," he mumbles. "It's not a rush, mylimasis."

Will shakes his head. He knows, *fuck*, he knows. But there's power in this that he's starving for, deeply desires the messiness and the closeness of it. He leans forward, only hesitates when Hannibal's hands in his hair slow him; narrows his eyes and shoots him a quelling glance. "Let me try again."

Hannibal breathes out in a shudder, the barest flash of teeth. "If you want to, I'll let you. But I may have to stop you if you want this to progress further."

Will blinks. Then the words sink in, and pride and pleasure settle in his chest, makes him purr. He nods, leaning in to rub his mouth against the side of Hannibal's shaft, a smooth, slippery back-and-forth. "Good?"

He huffs a laugh. Touches Will's cheeks, cradles his jaw. "Inexperienced," he admits. "But just watching you is unimaginable."

Will smiles. Hums. His lashes lower, and he swallows the taste of Hannibal's precome, the slickness of his own saliva. "I want to learn how to make you come like this."

Hannibal closes his eyes for a moment. "Darling, your learning curve is alarmingly steep."

“Mm-hm,” Will murmurs smugly, and glances up through his lashes at the gentle flush on Hannibal’s cheeks, his throat, and meets his eyes as they open. His hands curl around Hannibal’s hips and tug, an insistent little nudge. “Closer.”

Hannibal’s eyes flash. His teeth clench, but he obliges, and Will rewards him with the mercy of helping him slip his suit pants down his legs and off, and pushing his briefs so the waistband sits snugly beneath his balls. Like this, balanced carefully at the edge of the couch, Will’s leverage is better. The ache of his own erection is insistent, immense, but his focus is singular and solely for Hannibal. His legs shuffle open, his center of gravity drops. The ache in his thighs is already so sweet that Will can imagine Hannibal’s hands on him, pushing him to where he’s wanted, but—

Not yet. Not *yet.*

Hannibal’s cock is thick, flushed, dripping precome as Will slicks his hand toward the base and jacks it back up. Watches Hannibal’s face, the flicker of his responses. Last time, pinned between Hannibal’s weight and the refrigerator, Will had been the one holding on for dear life. This time, the knowledge of Hannibal’s blatant want is empowering. Emboldening.

“Slowly,” Hannibal warns him through the tightness in his jaw. “Don’t strain yourself.” The first lick is tentative. Slow. Wet. Will revels in his breathless sigh. “That’s good.”

There’s a place below the head of Hannibal’s cock that, when Will pushes back his foreskin and sucks, makes his hips twitch in a way he tries and fails to restrain. At first, the shock of it nearly gags him again. Then comes the realization and the arousal and the power, and Will searches out more of those spots, hidden secrets to learn his body: the way that touching Hannibal’s abdomen makes it twitch and tighten beneath his hand, and suction applied harshly and consistently to whatever Will can comfortably fit in his mouth is enough to make his hands fist in Will’s hair. That twisting his wrist and tightening his fingers in a slow-rolling wave makes him shiver, and licking his slit before sliding back down will make him growl. The wet sounds of Will’s mouth around him make his lips fall open, make him gasp in short, sharp breaths. That moaning around Hannibal’s cock when he unintentionally fucks up and in and slides to the back of Will’s throat is enough to make him bare his teeth, swear, clutch at Will’s shoulders and nudge him back, the both of them red-faced and panting.

“Enough, Will,” he says, so dark and low. “That’s enough.”

Will’s hands tremble on Hannibal’s thighs as he holds on for balance in all senses of the word, leaving sticky handprints he can’t summon the presence of mind to be embarrassed about. His face burns and burns and burns; he knows he must be blotchy with breathlessness and desire, but he doesn’t give a good goddamn when Hannibal looks at him like this. Like he’d gladly push Will onto his back on the rug before the fire and crawl atop him, spread him out and fuck him until Will is the one swearing and snarling.

Hannibal pulls his briefs over his cock, the cotton wet and stained and obscene as he stands. The muscles in his legs twitch, but his stance is strong, and Will envies him. Will’s thighs shake from being spread for so long, ache from bearing Will’s weight. The insides frizzle and twinge as Hannibal hauls him up off his knees, into his arms, and meets him for a kiss. God, even just a kiss is so *much;* Will accepts Hannibal’s tongue with a thready moan, pants for breath with his open mouth as Hannibal licks him, tastes him, *takes* him.

Will is shaking, unsteady with his want. He slides his hands beneath the open halves of Hannibal’s shirt, around his waist, and crushes their bodies together despite Hannibal’s sensitive hiss. His warmth is a balm as Will tucks his face into Hannibal’s neck; his pulse against Will’s cheek a metronome to keep time to their mutual need. Hannibal’s arms come around him with ease, one encircling his

narrow shoulders, the other twining into Will's curls. Hannibal's chest hair tickles, scratches pleasantly against the satin and lace, an overload of sensory stimulation that keeps him on edge, despite the comfort Will demands in his silence and claims for his own.

His fingernails dig into Hannibal's skin in a desperate attempt to hold on to his composure. In the back of his mind, his animal brain anxiously paces at the thought of getting a snarl for his trouble. He is relieved down to his bones when Hannibal simply rubs his back and hums, rumbling like thunder, like a wildcat.

He stops breathing when Hannibal turns his face into Will hair, gently rolls the shell of his ear between his teeth. "Let me take you upstairs, beloved." Kisses his earlobe, and just below that, over his rabbiting pulse. "Come to bed with me."

"Yes," Will growls, and bares his teeth against Hannibal's shoulder. Imagines he could still find the imprints of that damning bite if he sank in deep enough a second time. If he left a mark. A scar. More permanent than words. More permanent than a promise, or even a ring. "Yes."

Perhaps Hannibal should have anticipated how thoroughly Will Graham would shake his foundations. From the time that they met, there was a pull between them; a strange, potentially-fatal attraction that could have easily spelt doom for them both if they had fit together in any way *less* than they do.

Instead, they have walked this path together to this moment, and every step of it has been completely and utterly unpredictable. Even this night has turned out so differently than what Hannibal might have expected. Each hour has brought surprises. Each exchange has brought new understanding, or sent him into a spiral of deeper and darker desire *for* that understanding.

Somewhere along the line, and Hannibal is not sure when or where, Will Graham has become the cornerstone to Hannibal's memory palace, opposite to Mischa and Murasaki. He has built himself into Hannibal's life in such a way that he will never be extracted without destruction.

Will sits on the edge of Hannibal's bed in the dark, blankets and sheets turned down at the foot of it, watching him strip himself from the last of his worldly confines. Will, too, is down to the last scraps of his outer persona, and what waits beneath the confines of his undergarments is a creature that cannot be defined by any word or any name other than *Hannibal's.*

When Hannibal turns to him, Will has pulled the band of lace around his chest up over his head. He glances down at it in his hands, and carelessly drops it to the floor. He touches the alluring shape of his erection through the fabric of his panties, and his lashes flutter; white teeth sink into his lush lower lip, bruised raw red from Hannibal's kisses and from sucking Hannibal's cock.

Unbelievable. Unexpected.

He anticipated Will's affection; he's worked hard for it, to earn it, and to have it given freely. To an extent, his lust, too, had been expected—but in a simple, juvenile way. Will is young, in his prime, and the sexuality that comes attached with having a regular partner, as well as mutually private living situations, has put them in a unique position to fulfill each other's needs whenever they arise. What he had *not* anticipated was the visceral hunger that stared out at him from behind Will's eyes, the

pleasure in his power over Hannibal. His willingness to surrender himself fully to the pleasure of a lover, while concurrently demanding complete and utter control over Hannibal's body.

Perhaps loving a creature such as Will had been inevitable—or perhaps his presence is a miracle, or a blessing, or some other holy, unknowable thing. All Hannibal knows is how thoroughly he's been captured by Will's thrall, and how ravenous he is to consume him.

Will tips his head to the side as he meets Hannibal's eyes, and a cascade of curls tumbles over his shoulder. He is painfully lovely, terribly wanting—

—and Hannibal can no longer bear to deny them both.

He prowls to the bed and Will reaches for him; touches his ribs, his chest, spreads his legs for Hannibal to step and stand between. Tilts his chin up to seek and accept Hannibal's kiss, murmurs an affectionate sound when Hannibal cradles his face in his palms and sups the ambrosia of Will's adoration. Will's eyes are half-lidded, the remnants of his smoky makeup accentuating the color of his eyes as they catch the moonlight. He's such a stunning little thing, a creature all his own category, truly deserving of a title other than male or female.

Hannibal's fingertips trace down his throat, over his shoulder, his chest. Pauses to brush a thumb over one pink, pebbled nipple just to hear Will hiss, and continues. Sternum, ribcage, tender belly, to the sharp peak of his iliac crest; touches his knuckles to the soft satin waistband of his underwear. "May I —"

"Please," Will whispers, and lifts his hips before Hannibal can finish the thought. He's eager, terribly wanting, and obviously aware of it; he smiles wryly, but hooks one thumb into the waistband to help Hannibal drag the panties down, peel them from his thighs and calves and—

"Just. Hannibal, *please,"* he says, lip curled up over his teeth, jaws parted in a display that says he is ready and willing to bite, cornered by circumstance and desperate for a way out. An escape. Freedom, found solely in intimacy. The irony of it is glorious, but Will is not the only one trapped in the sort of cage that love creates of creatures like them.

Hannibal would see him liberated; the door of his prison wrenched open, and the predator running wild at his side. The pair of them, at liberty to bite and breed as they so desire, to hunt and feed and gorge themselves to their hearts' content.

He'll gift that freedom. He'll give it gladly, damn the cost.

"Move up the bed," Hannibal murmurs fondly. "You know I'll give you whatever you need."

Will looks at him with such love, such *trust,* as he pushes himself back and makes room for Hannibal to crawl over him. Will spreads his legs so readily for him; Hannibal hums his approval as he settles in the valley Will creates for him, the cradle of quivering thighs around his hips so their cocks slot together, still sticky from the worship of Will's mouth.

Hannibal rests his forearms flat on the mattress on either side of Will's head, careful not to pin Will's hair beneath his weight. Will, for his part, doesn't seem to care—he touches Hannibal's cheek and draws him down, opens his mouth, and licks hungrily at the inside of Hannibal's teeth. He touches the asymmetrical line of them, unknowing and thus uncaring of what his mouth has done, the things Hannibal has consumed. Will is not yet aware, but someday soon he will be. With each passing day, Hannibal is certain he's closer to seeing, and hopes he's another day closer to understanding.

Will kicks his legs up around Hannibal's waist. He doesn't move like one who's inexperienced, but perhaps that's simply indicative of his comfort with Hannibal and his confidence. He hums with pleasure at the thought; he wants Will comfortable with him. Slips his hand beneath one thigh, and hitches Will higher as he thrusts down against him.

"Oh," Will breathes. His head tips back, mouth open. He rolls his hips up, arches his back, and gasps when Hannibal kisses the hollow of his throat. "Hannibal. If we could just skip this part of the foreplay this once—I can't." He sounds so pretty, so pained.

Under normal circumstances, Hannibal might be inclined to agree. Instead, he strokes down Will's flank, rubs comforting little circles on his naked hip. Sucks a small pink mark beneath Will's collarbone, carefully clear of his teeth. "I want to see you come apart, mylimasis." He can think of few statements that would be more true, under the circumstances. "I want to see you overcome. And preparing you would be easier with your muscles relaxed, if that's still what you want."

"I want it," Will murmurs. "You. Fuck."

Hannibal chuckles. "Yes, that *is* the idea."

That, at least, draws a hysterical bark of laughter from Will. "You ass," he says fondly. Looks up, pushes himself up on his forearms—hisses loudly, and drops back down. "Goddamn, my hair. Didn't think about a hair tie for after the gala."

Hannibal blinks. Smiles slightly. Retreats only far enough to lean over to his bedside table and pull the drawer open, and fishes a simple black elastic from inside it. "I found this after you last spent the night. Forgive me for my presumption of putting it here, but I thought we'd find a use for it."

Will takes it with a sort of mute wonder. Blinks slowly, and even more slowly smiles. He gathers his curls with his fingers, combs them to the crown of his head and ties them roughly with the elastic. Function, rather than form, but Hannibal cannot deny that the haphazard nature of his bun is attractive because of the haste in which he tied it, and for what reason.

Will pushes himself up again. Lifts his chin insistently for a kiss, and sighs his pleasure when it's given to him. "I love you."

Hannibal is stunned into silence. Will, below him, grins at whatever it is he sees in Hannibal's expression. The simplicity of the confession is shocking, even with his prior knowledge. The cause, unknowable. Why this, and now? No grand gesture, no singular, earth-shattering moment—

"This is *why* I love you," Will says, and kisses him again. "You live this huge, immaculate life, Hannibal, and you preserve my mess so I can be at home with you." Smiles. Noses at his cheek. "Thank you."

Will is… baffling. "You're welcome."

Will kisses him, a chaste, soft peck. Flops onto his back, and bounces on the mattress. Abruptly, his smile gains an edge. He squirms in place. "Now, do whatever the hell you want to do, but hurry up and fuck me, or give me the lube, or—whatever." He reaches blindly and paws at Hannibal's bedside drawer. "I'm not an idiot, I know how to finger myself. Although—"

Will turns his head and frowns thunderously when he emerges with the lube—not at the bottle, Hannibal realizes, but at the press-on fake nails he's worn all evening. Then, swiftly and without mercy, he drops the bottle beside their bodies on the bed, and brings his dominant hand to his mouth.

Closes his teeth horizontally around the base of one nail, and—*crack* —whatever glue he used lets free, not strong enough to withstand the pressure of his jaws. Then a second, and a third; Will frowns after that, and swiftly bites the gel off pinky and thumbnail to match. Scoops them up in his palm and dumps them unceremoniously onto Hannibal's bedside table.

Graceless. Tactless. And yet, Will looks incredibly pleased with himself.

Will reaches up with the hand still bearing his artificial claws and trails them lovingly through Hannibal's hair. "Now get down here," he insists, and presses the clear bottle against Hannibal's wrist until he adjusts his weight and accepts it. "We've waited long enough."

Hannibal's eyes narrow. He tucks his knees underneath him and rests one hand on Will's belly, watching with some satisfaction as Will flexes into the touch. His thighs are splayed over Hannibal's, falling open easily and held in place by the bulk of Hannibal's body between them. Will hums his approval and reaches his arms above his head, creating a truly stunning parabolic arch that Hannibal knows he will write formulas to replicate later.

"Hannibal," Will murmurs.

Hannibal inclines his head, and observes the subtle dilation of Will's pupils at the quiet *click* of the bottle cap. Will's wrists cross one over the other, and his fingers curl in a fruitless, instinctive search for contact. For a moment, Hannibal wonders what it would be like to tie Will's hands together and secure him to the bed frame. To hold him down, so that he might enjoy Will at his leisure. "Yes, darling?"

Will's lashes lower. As he settles back against the bed, the gentle flush across his chest is illuminated by the moonlight in the sharp-edged shapes the window panes cast. He is painted in the silhouette of some noir femme fatale down to the smoky makeup and sharp-lined eyes. But that confidence is fading; he's embarrassed by something, or there's something on his mind that similarly affects him. Hannibal slicks his fingers with the viscous, water-based lubricant, and rubs them together until it's no longer cold to the touch.

Will exhales shakily, hitches his hips up; closes his eyes, and his cock twitches where it lies sweet and pink on his abdomen. "I've been thinking."

Hannibal pauses. Thought in and of itself is not an expression of hesitation, nor is it one of dissent, but progressing with anything less than Will's full and enthusiastic consent is an idea he finds abhorrent. "Do you want me to stop?"

Will's eyes snap open. "What? *No.* No, no." He blinks rapidly, and looks so distressed for a moment that Hannibal nearly thinks to apologize for the question were it not one rooted firmly in concern for Will's continued interest. Still, Will reaches for him, breaks his lovely posture to push himself up on one arm, and molds his palm to the angle of Hannibal's jaw. He draws him forward for a brief, deep kiss. "Don't stop. That's the opposite of what I want."

He lingers. His eyes drop to the bottle, and Will exhales softly as he picks it up. Hannibal, too, pauses breathing altogether as Will echoes his movements, wets his newly-unmanicured fingers, but does not wait for the lubrication to warm. Instead, Hannibal watches in silent, rapt attention as Will slips his hand between his legs and strokes the pads of his fingers over his entrance; shivers and shudders, but stays propped up enough to watch the progression as Hannibal, too, reaches out to touch him.

Will exhales sharply at the first contact, more a gasp than a sigh. "Yeah, that's nice," he whispers, and meets Hannibal's eyes with his cheeks flushed high and pink. "Kiss me."

Hannibal obliges without hesitation—leans forward to meet Will's mouth with his own, to tease apart the seam of his lips with his tongue. Their fingers brush together; Will rubs in the lube in small circles, teasing pressure with his fingertip, and Hannibal mimics him. It does stand to reason that Will might be familiar with this. It would certainly be natural exploration at his age, with or without a regular sexual partner. Stimulation, gratification. If Will is familiar with what he enjoys, that will only make the process easier.

Will nibbles at Hannibal's lower lip as he slips his own index finger into his body; slow, smooth thrusts that make him hum with idle consideration. When Hannibal breaks their kiss in favor of watching, Will's cheeks turn bright and hot, but he doesn't stop.

Hannibal flattens his clean hand on Will's flank, petting from his rib cage to his hip in slow, smooth strokes of his palm. Will relaxes into him, exhales slowly and shakily. He pants for a moment as he tugs at his rim, pushes, stretches in even, gentle movements. Will whimpers when Hannibal circles the tip of his finger around the base of Will's, that tender place where it joins with his body.

"How does it feel?" Hannibal murmurs.

"Like I've never had anyone watch me finger myself before," Will replies with a harsh laugh. He shuffles on the arm that bears his weight. He can't be comfortable, but his angle for penetration is also less than ideal. A pang of satisfaction and arousal clutches at Hannibal's gut when Will pushes a second finger in and gasps. It quickly becomes apparent that the sound was not entirely one of pleasure, and Will's arm gives out beneath him.

Will shakes out his limb, grimacing; perhaps it fell asleep with the strain of holding him up. Regardless, in moments, Will's expression slackens. Rolls his head back and hums and arches, the change in his angle just enough to touch something else inside him. Hannibal doesn't have to imagine what.

Watching Will work himself is a new kind of visual and aural gratification of color and movement and slick sounds, a barrage of sexual stimulus. Hannibal sighs as he rubs at Will's rim, blushing pink and shiny with lube, and is viscerally satisfied at the way he squirms. Whether closer or away, Hannibal is not entirely sure—only that the shift of Will's knuckles betrays the way his fingers curl inside himself, and his mouth parts on a gentle moan.

"Hannibal," Will whimpers, and clutches at the sheets. "I want—mm."

His free hand tightens on its slow path down Will's thigh. It pulls a gasp from him, and a roll of his hips as Hannibal digs into plush, pale flesh. Pushes lightly at the tight stretch of Will's hole with the pad of his thumb and is rewarded as his head thrashes to the side, a soft little *hah* as he clenches tightly around his fingers. Hannibal narrowly resists growling at the thought of all the delicious noises he'll be able to pull from Will once he's inside him, sheathed deep within his burning body with Will's legs locked around his hips. "What you do you want, darling?"

Will arches his neck, head tossed back, eyes tightly closed as though pained, not so much thrusting now as rubbing in short, tight circles. "Come here," he pants. "Next to me. Here with me."

Hannibal blinks slowly. Debates the merits of leaving this position for only a second, measured against the counterweight of what Will wants. He scoops his palms beneath Will's thighs and lowers them back to the bed, a faint flicker of pleasure in Will's whimper at the loss of his touch, but also his sigh at the relief of strain. Will rubs the space beside him with his free hand, and Hannibal prowls over him, then allows himself to settle in. Turns onto his side as Will moves his arm out of the way, up across the mattress as Will rolls to meet him. His forearm settles beneath Hannibal's neck, and he's

right—Hannibal feels incredibly present with him like this, close enough that when Will leans forward to kiss him, he closes the distance with ease and without strain.

He laps at Hannibal's teeth, at the roof of his mouth, and when he finally breaks away, it's with the dark, glittering eyes of some feral creature overcome with need. He pushes close; Hannibal hisses as their cocks brush, a tantalizing little tease, and Will hitches one leg up and over Hannibal's hip. Drags him closer with the power hidden in the corded muscle of his thighs and calves, and pulls his fingers free from his own body with a gasp of breath. Finds Hannibal's hand, and pulls it between his legs.

Stares at him in the dark. A plea. A challenge. "Touch me," Will whispers. "Get me ready for you."

Heat spears Hannibal's chest, his limbs, his gut. His cock twitches at the quiet command in Will's voice, a tone that promises such sweet indulgence—and why should Hannibal deny him? His fingers are already wet.

He doesn't hesitate. His hands are broader than Will's, his fingers thicker, but that only means Will gasps with such rough, decadent surprise as Hannibal pushes two fingers into him. He's so hot inside, clutching and flexing around the unfamiliar intrusion of a stranger within his body.

"Oh, fuck," Will gasps.

Will has made him plenty of room to work, a fact he rewards by pushing his free arm beneath Will's torso and hauling him close enough so their chests rub together, so Hannibal can easily mouth and suck at the pounding pulse in Will's neck. It's intimate—easily the most intimate sexual encounter Hannibal has had in recent years, or perhaps ever. Every inch of them is adhered with sweat, both comfortable and pleasantly strenuous as Hannibal curls his fingers and drags out, tugging gently at Will's entrance, and pushing in again. Searching for that place that Will had so easily found in the familiar home of his own body—

He finds it, that soft and firm and swollen place that Hannibal crooks his fingers against and strokes, and Will nearly sobs. He flings his arm up around Hannibal's neck and pulls them tight together, hitches his leg up like he could *climb* Hannibal if he tried much harder. "Fucking—*god,* " Will moans. "Yes. *Yes,* there."

He can feel it when Will's heel pulls him in tight, when his toes curl with tortured rapture. When he makes a sound that Hannibal has heard most often from long extended keens of pain. It's an animal sound, one that correlates to the sudden roll of Will's hips, unable to keep still. Push and pull, in and out, rubbing himself forward against Hannibal's cock and his belly and back against his insistent fingers. He's dripping against Hannibal's skin, unable to help himself.

Will shouts as Hannibal twists his wrist and presses his thumb firmly against the stretch of skin behind his sac, still fucking him in slow, momentous pushes with his index and middle finger pressed together. Will's voice is muffled as he ducks his face against Hannibal's shoulder, half-rolled underneath him, certainly covered enough to limit his mobility. "More," he says. Demands. "One more."

Hannibal growls, bares his teeth but does not bite as he spreads his fingers slowly, stretching, testing. The lube has thinned, started to dry, sticky against Will's skin, but when Hannibal tries to retreat in pursuit of the bottle, Will *snarls.* Clenches. Pulls Hannibal tight against his body with all the strength in his limbs, and nips at his shoulder with a stinging flash of teeth. "That is *not* what I said," Will snaps.

If it weren't for his own benefit, and if Hannibal's complacency now wouldn't cause discomfort later, he would be more than pleased to indulge Will that sweet edge of friction he seeks. As it is, his bared teeth find an echoing set against Will's throat, but he's careful. Holds, but does not hurt. A warning that he readily releases when Will falls still beneath him. "I know what you said," he rumbles against Will's pulse. "If you think I have *any* desire to remove myself from you for anything *less* than your safety, you've desperately underestimated how much I want you, Will."

Will huffs. Stills. Slowly, slowly relaxes, and pushes his face against the blade of Hannibal's shoulder, peppering sweet, soft kisses to the sting he left behind. "Okay. Okay. I'm sorry, I just." He makes a closed-mouthed sound that is one part arousal and one part agony, and squirms in Hannibal's hold. Tucks his face into the curve of Hannibal's neck. "I need you. Please."

Hannibal's free hand flattens against Will's back, rubs a smooth and comforting arc between his shoulder blades, a silent *apology accepted.* With the other, he slowly withdraws, and sighs against Will's skin at his bereft little whine of loss. "I know," Hannibal murmurs. "I know." Then, with a small, rueful smile that Will won't see, adds, "The drawbacks of a relationship with a doctor, I'm afraid. We're overly-mindful of safety."

Will is silent for a moment. The sound of the bottle cap is loud, interrupted only by the ambient sounds of their breathing and the central heating in the room.

Then, Will's muscles slowly relax. He draws back, but only enough to look up through his lashes at Hannibal, uncertain. Lips parted. Face hot. He swallows hard, and Hannibal pauses to take in the depth of that expression and what, exactly, it might mean.

"What if," Will says, and stops. Offers a small, flickering smile, and a tight pull between his brows. Tries again. "What if I… didn't want you to be safe. About something. So to speak."

Hannibal stares at him. The possibilities of that question are… interesting. Intriguing. He tips his head to the side, and allows the mental image of bites and bruises and scratches and pinpricks of blood their due, lets them amplify and inform his arousal before he shuts them away. "In what regard?"

Will ducks his head. Glances between their bodies, and slowly rolls their hips together in a way that shoots insistent sparks of lightning up Hannibal's spine, scratches at his innards with the desire to *have.* Then he reaches back for Hannibal's hand, slippery with fresh lube, dripping down into his palm, and pulls him back to where he's wanted without a word.

The slide is incredible. The *sound* is obscene as Hannibal pushes the slick into him and smears it against the reddened rim of his hole, follows it with three fingers just the way Will begged him for. Oh, they go in so easy—Will's forehead connects with Hannibal's chest, rubs his cheek against the thick, rough thatch of his chest hair, and moans helplessly as he's swept under by the current of his lust.

Hannibal fucks in slow, deep, spreads his fingers again, determined to make this as easy on Will as possible. The least discomfort, the best possible sensation.

"I don't want you to use a condom," Will gasps. "I wanna feel you."

...and it seems Will is hungry for the same.

Hannibal's chest is tight at the thought of it. It's nothing he's ever indulged in, never trusting promises of good health or birth control and unwilling to risk the consequences. But with Will—

He thrusts in deep, to the webbing of his fingers and the tantalizing, impossible ridge of his knuckles. Will moans, hiccups; presses his face against Hannibal's chest and whines through his nose, tense and sparking with need.

"You've never been with anyone before," Hannibal says. It's not a question, precisely; he's nearly certain of the answer, but he has to be absolutely sure. "In any context?"

"No," Will whispers, and when Hannibal rubs *hard* at that tender spot, Will's whole body twitches, and his short fingernails and artificial claws all find Hannibal's back as he clings for stability, for *anything,* and he cries, "And I'll never fucking have anyone else *ever,* Hannibal, *Jesus fucking Christ! God—"*

There is only enough time for that vehement, cursing promise to strike Hannibal in the heart before Will snarls, and the sound of it is utterly unhinged, terribly inhuman. Solely with the strength of his body and the sharp sting of his nails in Hannibal's back, he rolls them fully until he's pinned beneath Hannibal against the mattress. Spreads his legs and lifts his head, and his eyes are nothing but the gorgeous black of a creature starving for fulfillment as he snaps, "Hannibal, I love you, but if you don't get your cock inside me right now, I can't be held responsible for what I do to you."

Whatever monster is inside his beloved, it only brings out the darkest and most terrible traits of the one that lives in Hannibal. There is only selfishness left in him, only the rough talons of need and the fangs of ravenous hunger, waiting to bite and lay claim to the mate who will never accept anyone but him. *Never.*

Hannibal's arm is half-asleep from being beneath Will's body, so he uses the hand still covered in slick only to spread the remainder of the lube and the slow drip of his precome over his shaft, then clutches at the sheets to support his weight. Lifts one pale leg around his hip to make the angle easier, and meets Will's eyes in the bright glow of the moonlight. His tense jaw. His desperate, needing eyes.

Leans forward, just for a moment, to lap at Will's blood-red mouth. "I love you," he rumbles. "And I would let you."

Will's head drops back, eyes squeezed shut and mouth wide open as Hannibal pushes in, a slow and steady descent into the blistering heat of his hellish body, this tender little demon beneath him who goes so still he stops breathing.

It's silent, so silent. Will's heart pounds hard enough that Hannibal can see the thrum of it in his chest, fluttering in his neck, clutching around his shaft so tightly it nearly hurts.

Hannibal bares his teeth. Leans over Will. Rests his forehead against Will's sternum, and is unsure of whose sweat is whose. He locks his muscles despite the instinct that tells him to fuck into the willing creature beneath him, and waits out the return of that eager, demanding nature that has gotten them this far tonight.

He can be patient. He *will* be patient, for Will's sake.

Chest ready to burst, guts twisting with terrible want, Hannibal presses his mouth to the bone he knows lies beneath Will's pink flesh. Laps the sweat away from the dip between his pectorals, and waits.

Will's hand slips into his hair. Gently pushes his bangs back from his eyes, as he had done for Will earlier tonight. Cradles the back of Hannibal's neck, and holds him in place with no force at all but the hope that Hannibal will stay.

Muscle by muscle, Will relaxes. And when Hannibal looks up to meet his eyes, there is only a trace of that fury left, buried beneath want and wonder. “Are you alright, Will?”

Will nods silently. Unbidden, pulls his other leg up around Hannibal’s waist, and hisses softly at the shift in position.

And then comes the hunger.

“Move,” Will says quietly.

Hannibal starts slow. Despite his best attempts to stretch Will out, he is still thicker and longer than three fingers, and any variance is an understandable need for adjustment. But outside that rational understanding, Hannibal’s animal brain is… limited. Stunned into silence by the tight, rolling heat of Will’s muscles, experienced without barricades or coverings. The way his body ripples around Hannibal’s cock as he slowly pulls out and thrusts forward, steady and deep. Slips past that place inside Will, at this angle, but makes note of its location for later exploitation.

Will’s fingers rest in his hair, and he pets Hannibal like something he treasures so thoroughly he can desire nothing else but touching him.

A shift; Hannibal presses up into Will’s hands, not enough to pull away, and recalibrates his angle, and the push of it makes Will’s hips twitch up in surprise. He gasps. “A little faster?” Will says like it’s a question and not Hannibal’s singular greatest desire in this moment.

He doesn’t answer, but does as he’s told. Will’s legs spasm. He lifts his head, eyes wide, and searches out that connection. “I—Hannibal.”

The slide of his cock entering Will’s body is deliciously smooth, a sensation he fully intends to chase now that he has Will’s consent. Push in, pull out, deep thrusts that gain momentum and rock Will’s body with him. A wave meeting the land; a boat swaying on the sea.

An oncoming storm. Will’s eyes darken as Hannibal rears back and pushes up on his knees, reclaims that position they started this in, with Will’s body angled up and supported by Hannibal’s thighs. He can push deeper like this, and faster, and just the increase in pace drags a moan from Will’s chest. And then a gasp.

And then Will clenches around him again, and stars burst behind Hannibal’s eyes with the stunning jolt of it; his rhythm stutters but does not cease, but when Will looks at him, his face is painted with dark satisfaction. “Does it feel good when I do that?”

Everything about him feels incredible. Instead, Hannibal’s lips part on a quiet, forceful exhale, and he says, “Yes.”

Will smiles. slowly pushes his arms up over his head, and lifts his chin.

Rolls his hips, and grins when Hannibal growls. Gasps with stunned pleasure and delight when Hannibal retaliates by curling his hands around Will’s hips and thrusting in a short, hard stab, pulling him down so their bodies meet in a clash of sound.

“God,” Will says, and laughs out loud, elated. “Fuck yes, do that again.” Grinds down into it this time, and his eyes squeeze shut in bliss. “Oh.”

Hannibal’s palms slip up his waist in burning paths, feeling flushed skin wracked by the shivers caused by sweat cooling in the air. Will is a wash of sensual marvels, from the scent of his exertion

and his precome pooling on his belly to the soft cries he makes as Hannibal fucks him in earnest, and begs for more.

Everything he has to give, Will seems determined to take.

Will rocks with the force of Hannibal's thrusts, clenches and flutters at the slick and sloppy sounds of Hannibal fucking him, squirms and wriggles in place and, more than once, reaches to touch the erection leaking on his stomach and stops himself short. Twists his hands in Hannibal's sheets and holds on.

Hannibal growls, widens his legs to spread Will apart further and leans over him, to the gorgeous sound of Will's gasping cry. His cock twitches, and Will exhales hard at the feel of it within him. Still doesn't touch. "Why do you deny yourself?"

The change in leverage silences Will entirely when Hannibal rocks forward and feels the hot, swollen head of his cock connect with that cluster of nerves. His back arches from the bed. He *drips*. "Ha-Hannibal."

"Hm?" Hannibal growls, and aims *just* so. Will chokes on the force of his own gasp. "Take your pleasure, Will. I want you to."

"No. I want to last, I—" Will laughs and moans and bites so hard at his own lip that when they part, they come away bloody. His eyes open at the shock of it.

Hannibal could not resist if he tried.

He fucks in deep, slips one hand around the back of Will's neck and pulls him up to kiss. Tastes his blood in the absence of a bite. The arousal that burns through him is not unlike spiced mead beneath those iron undertones. Will is unique, singular, delicious. His.

"Will," Hannibal says against his mouth, and licks the wounds Will's own teeth caused, devours his gasp of shock. "Some night, I'll keep you on edge for hours. Tease you and taste you and keep you exactly as I'd like you. Not tonight." Hannibal pushes his hand beneath Will's back and lifts him with the best of his strength, tips him until only his shoulders touch the bed, and Hannibal has control of the movement of his hips. The depth he reaches. And he aims for that spot again and again and again, until Will's eyes are huge and his mouth is open and his voice shakes with it—sharp, soft *ah, ah, ahh-haah* noises that Will can no more control than conceal.

He whimpers. His eyes squeeze shut. Will's mouth opens silently with something that maybe starts as a moan, but comes out as a bark of laughter. "Shit!"

Hannibal slows, but only slightly; emulates the roll of Will's hips, lifting as he pulls out and shoves back in *hard,* over and over and over, and Will's eyes fly open, a shuddering breath from his lungs. "Oh, oh—*ohhh, God*." Pushes back to meet Hannibal with every thrust. Rolls his head back against the mattress as his muscles tense, as his hand clutches at his own belly and stops short. Digs those short, sharp nails into his own skin. *"Nnnn,* Hannibal, fuck. Oh, fuck. Oh my God—"

There's an oddity in watching his muscles shift below his skin and knowing exactly what Will would look like separated down to cuts of meat, and knowing that Hannibal prefers him this way without measure. Whole, whining, arching into his hands and unblemished by anything but his nails, his teeth.

Will is worth so much more to him alive than dead, and still, Hannibal's sole desire is to consume him. Hold Will between his jaws and palms until he falls apart, until nothing remains of his original

self. Until he hands himself over to Hannibal, body and soul, *begging* for all that he is. *Knowing* what he is.

He wants Will to know. And he wants Will to beg for him in spite of it. *Because* of it. To place himself in range of Hannibal's teeth because he loves, because he trusts. To hold Hannibal's head to his chest, knowing his mouth chooses to please with sucking kisses rather than tear his heart out with a predator's fangs.

He wants Will's heart, his love, fully informed and freely given.

And he is determined to have it. Soon.

"Will," he demands, and the sweet sounds of Will's self-imposed torture build pressure in his belly, desire in his mouth. The syllable of his beloved's name is foreign like this, a command and a curse and a prayer in his mother tongue. It feels holier than the name of God ever has. "I want to see you come for me."

Will whimpers, so sweet. "I will. I will, if you—" licks his bloody lips "—come inside me. Please."

Will never ceases to surprise him, to thrill him, to utterly decimate him. Hannibal bares his teeth and snarls, *"Yes."*

Will keens and submits; wraps his fist tight around his cock at long last and slicks himself with the drips of his own precome, fucks back onto Hannibal's cock like being dragged onto it isn't enough to satisfy him, and pulls fast, faster—

Will's voice breaks on a high pitched sound that can only be called a howl, exposes his teeth like fangs to the air and cries like a wounded thing. Sobs and shakes, spurts and drips pearlescent drops of come that slide over his fingers, the pink head of his cock as it peeks through his fist, and Hannibal fucks him through it until Will clenches so drastically that he can't anymore.

Will gulps for breath through his mouth, his eyes huge and wide and wet. Hannibal grits his teeth—

Will surges up, curls with all the strength he can summon in his core, and wraps his arms around Hannibal's neck, tucks his face against the blade of Hannibal's shoulder where there are no tendons to sever, no major veins to puncture. Just naked, unmarked flesh.

Will bites.

Not hard. Just enough to break the skin.

Just enough.

Hannibal thrusts in hard and deep and *grinds;* Will cries out, squirms, legs locked around Hannibal's waist and rocking into it like he could come a second time if he just got Hannibal far enough inside him. Tosses his head back, sobs, exposes his throat—

He looks euphoric. Orgasmic. Hannibal could not hope to create a more beautiful tableau in death than what he's made in life with Will Graham.

But he can most certainly try.

Hannibal holds him crushingly tight and presses his cheek to Will's thrumming heartbeat, gasps and moans, but stays his teeth. His cock pulses with release, muscles tightening and relaxing, twitches he

cannot control, but that Will soothes with quiet whimpers and gentle hands. He strokes Hannibal's hair, his back, his ribs, and when he finally unlatches his teeth from Hannibal's skin, showers his temple and cheek and wherever he can reach with quick, sweet kisses. Moans into Hannibal's ear, quiet and overcome, on every exhale, softer and softer until his voice fades into panting breaths, meaningless murmurs.

White light behind his eyes, a warm body in his arms. Will's voice. Will's love. Whispering it into Hannibal's hair between hitching breaths. "I love you," he says. "I love you so much." And breathed against his neck, so quietly Hannibal knows he isn't meant to hear it at all, "I'll kill him if he takes you from me."

Will rocks in his arms—or, Hannibal realizes, Will is rocking him. Self-soothing with his nurturing of Hannibal's needs as a bandage to his looming fears.

Oh, darling thing.

Hannibal spreads his palms over Will's back, rubs down his spine. Feels Will relax into his hold, and a twinge sparks in his shoulder as he leans forward to lower Will back to the bed. Gasps when Hannibal pulls back and his cock slips free. Will moans at the slow drip of come leaking from him, and even Hannibal watches in silence for a moment of visceral, animalistic satisfaction.

Then he leans over the side of the bed and fishes in his bedside drawer for a hankerchief; huffs ruefully at the impracticality of it, but brings it back to Will as a temporary offering with which to tidy the mess Hannibal has made of him. And he does, yes, but Will doesn't immediately remove himself from bed—he lies on his back and his eyes slowly shut, taking deep, slow breaths in the moonlight as he reaches up and pulls the elastic from his hair, rolls it onto his wrist. Wipes the dampness from his brow with the back of his hand. And then his eyes.

Lies in silence. Covers his brow and his eyes with his arm. His lip quivers, and he sniffs once, and Hannibal's chest clutches with dread and a terrible, awful thing that may very well be fear. "Will—"

"You *do* complete me. I don't know what I'd do without you," Will whispers.

Hannibal is not a nurturing person. This fact is well-established. But in that moment, he can do nothing less than crawl over Will's body and settle down atop him, bracket Will's head in with his arms, and press his mouth against Will's cheek.

His shoulder throbs, and Will's lips are still bloody, and Hannibal has never loved anything in quite the same way as he loves Will Graham.

"The world is wider than just you and I. Your options are limitless," Hannibal murmurs. "If anything were to happen to me—"

"I won't." Will's teeth click together. His mouth is so expressive that, even without the windows his eyes create to his untamed soul, Hannibal can see the shape of the monster inside. "Don't say it. I won't have anyone else."

Hannibal exhales through his nose, a temperate huff of breath. "Will—"

"If he hurts you," Will says, and his voice shakes, "That's it. For me. For *him.* There's only you."

Hannibal is silent; processes the words as Will removes the shield of his forearm from over his eyes, and loops it around Hannibal's back, instead. Winds his hand in Hannibal's hair. Clings, because his

heart demands the closeness at the threat of such a crushing loss.

“I won’t say that nothing will happen to me,” Hannibal replies. “It would be an insult to you, and, I think, to him.” Yes, certainly, if Hannibal were up against any other man except himself, the reality of this night would be very, very different. “And I love you very much.” Kisses his cheek in a chaste nuzzle of lips that Will sighs and leans into. “But there are others in this world, Will. To think I’m the only one who could fill your needs—”

“Hannibal.”

The words are meaningless anyway. He knows it. He is much more interested in what Will has to say as he meets the flat, deep stare of his beloved.

“You’re the kind of person that normal people wake up every morning, praying for the privilege to love them.” Will blinks slowly. His lips tremble again as he turns his face to meet Hannibal’s affectionate nosing, and his eyes flicker down to the red, bruised ring of his teeth on his shoulder. Swallows. Looks back at him, and leans in. “You’re it for me,” he says against Hannibal’s mouth. “You’re the only decent person I’ve ever met who has loved me *for* what I am and not in spite of it. You’re it. Just you.”

Will’s eyes close, and he gifts Hannibal with a kiss that is barely more pressure than a breath.

The words echo in Hannibal’s mind: the only *decent* person. Not the *only* person.

Will is no stranger to nuance.

They both know what he’s really saying.

Hannibal exhales slowly, cups Will’s cheek in his palm, and pulls him back again. Lips lock. Tongues touch. Breath is shared, exchanged between lives. “I wish I could set you free from this, beloved. The scars he’s left still sting you, perhaps more now than they did before.”

“I have too much to lose,” Will replies. The lines around his eyes when he smiles are not from joy, but from deep sadness and strain.

But Will has nothing to lose. He has everything to gain. If he can let go of the way he desperately clings to his prison door, he’ll realize what a life lies in wait outside the bars.

“Then why continue?” Hannibal asks curiously; not accusatory. “Your articles—he must see them as something akin to prayers, a plea for freedom, rather than simple analysis of his art. With each, his conviction has grown. Understanding begets understanding. So why do you do it?”

Will is silent.

Slowly, he inhales, and shudders through an exhale. “He knows who I am, Hannibal.”

Yes, he most certainly does. Still, he takes a moment, like this is information to be absorbed. “And so you fear he’ll learn about me.”

Will’s breath hitches. He turns his face to look up at Hannibal, true distress written into the lines of his face, true suffering. “I’m gonna keep you safe.”

It’s moments like these that, even in his sympathy for Will’s fear, give him footholds for hope. Loyalty this deep, this true, will not be easily shaken. And Hannibal is equally loyal to Will—to

seeing him happy and whole, not caught between the jagged halves of himself, bleeding. “Then I am equally responsible for keeping *you* safe, mylimasis.”

Will gazes up at him—soft, dark eyes that fade from despair to the expression of a creature who is learning how to trust that they are loved. “Mylimasis,” he murmurs. His inflection is near-perfect, and the word from his mouth is so strange and sweet in Hannibal’s ears that it fills him unexpectedly with delight. “I like that word.”

“I’m glad you do,” Hannibal murmurs. “Beloved.”

Will stares at him. The tendrils of realization creep in slowly, and Hannibal takes pleasure in seeing them take root. Will’s eyes narrow, and then widen. “But—” he chokes on an incredulous laugh. “You’ve called me that for weeks!”

Hannibal’s mouth tilts with a smile, small and genuine that shows his teeth. “Yes, so I have.”

“I—” Will loses track of words. Despite his great exertion of this evening, the depths to which he bared himself to Hannibal’s eyes and hands and heart, it is *this* that makes him blush so deeply that he looks like rare meat, the same pink-red of a bleeding heart. Whispers, “*Hannibal.”*

“I have faith in you, Will. What you can do. The things you can see that no one else has ever seen.” Hannibal traces the tip of his nose along Will’s. “Our journey is only just beginning, mylimasis. If anyone can find him, Will, I know it’s sure to be you.”

Will’s arms loop around his neck, and with a slow and steady sigh, he leans up for one long, lingering kiss. He smiles, too, but Hannibal does not have to share Will’s gift of perception to see the sadness that has wrapped around his heart. “I know.”

Chapter End Notes

reblahgabble.

aesthetic moodboard (lowkey nsfw-ish)

EDIT: now with heart-stoppingly GORGEOUS art by @winterofherdiscontent. Please support this amazing artist and reblog it here!!

your comments and tags give me life and sustain me through my long work days. please nourish me. <3

2:16

Chapter Notes

Hello my dears! I am.... insurmountably sorry that it took me this long to get this chapter to you. Moving and everything took a lot longer than expected, traveling was fantastic, but I got super sick as soon as I got home, and it took a lot out of me. But here we are... and this is it. The last chapter of the second arc.

I have no idea what my updates are going to be like moving forward, except that they'll likely be on Friday nights/Saturday mornings like this one. Notable exceptions will be made for the week of Thanksgiving/Black Friday, which is my busiest work week of the year. Other than that, I really do hope to get back to being consistent with this fic. Honestly, I missed all of you. And I'm finally to a point with this story that I've been looking forward to since I started. So let's do this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He dreams he rests within a nest of darkness, surrounded by softness, his head upon the chest of his beloved monster. Claws trail through his hair with the utmost gentleness, the pinpoints of sharp nails scraping his scalp and raising shivers in their wake. Will shifts and arches under his attention, black-hole eyes boring into his soul. He can do nothing but moan under the full force of that regard, grip hard at the base of branching antlers. He tips his head back and spreads himself out, a canvas of flesh awaiting the harsh strokes of the Ripper's carnivorous teeth.

He knows intrinsically that he will not be destroyed, but rather made ascendant—the love makes a home inside him, curls around him, as the Ripper pushes Will gently onto his back and sinks its fangs into the fragile flesh of his throat.

As he is consumed, so he is filled—he is a chalice for the desires of his beloved, and in this place of dreams, Will and all his facets are willing to receive everything this ferocious, feral creature has to offer him. All the things it awakens in him, and he longs to offer in return.

He is beloved. He is adored. He is so full that he is spilling over every edge, and Will is ecstatic, euphoric, as he overflows with blood.

The morning dawns radiant through the windows, strips of light that fall across their bodies through the paned glass. Though his pulse shudders and stutters with the remnants of the dream, Will is as content as he can ever remember being—warm and pleasantly sore, tucked beneath Hannibal's arm and curled around his side. His heart thrums steadily against Will's cheek; the rhythm of it is soothing, even, and does not shift tempo or betray his conscious state when he feels Hannibal's thumb stroke smooth circles over his spine.

When Will looks up, his eyes are open—the color of blood and brandy, fixed solely on him. Clear. Warm. He doesn't quite smile, but his pleasure is transparent; lazy and contented with Will in his grasp, and he looks… sated. Satisfied.

Will shuffles up to tuck his face into the curve of Hannibal's throat, press dry and cracked lips to his carotid in a more tender reflection of devotion than the Ripper had shown. He murmurs some indistinct sound when Hannibal's fingers twine into his tangled hair, touches the pads of his fingers to the base of Will's neck. The shadowy tendrils of the dream still cling to Will's mind, and under Hannibal's thrall he melts, mouth and muscles lax. Rubs his lips along Hannibal's jaw, his cheek. Smiles against the subtle scratch of the stubble growing in. It's so simple, so human. Less refined than Hannibal allows himself but for moments like this, and so the privilege of witnessing it is a keen pleasure. "Hi," Will whispers.

"Good morning," Hannibal murmurs in reply. Turns into Will's touch and rolls up onto his side, bracketing Will beneath him. He ducks his head, presses his nose to Will's temple and inhales, brushes his lips in a slow back-and-forth of silent worship. "You barely moved all night. I trust that means you got some sleep."

Will says nothing of the blurry, soft-edged memory of a monster in this very bed, a creature in Hannibal's place. Instead, Will nods. Slips his hand up Hannibal's chest, scratches gently through the hair there, and smiles at the intent flash of his eyes on Will's face. Curves gentle fingers around the back of Hannibal's neck, and guides him down to blanket Will's body entirely. Hannibal's a burning, comforting weight, practically purring with satisfaction as he settles atop him.

Will is surrounded, just shy of being crushed between the solidness of Hannibal's form and the softness of the mattress. It feels like being adored.

"It's been a long time since I slept that well," Will admits.

Hannibal sounds amused. "Then in the interest of your care, I must volunteer my services for whenever you require a good night's rest."

Will, too, smiles at that. "So generous, Doctor Lecter."

Hannibal's lashes dip, half-lidded and warm, tinged with a fond sort of smugness. "I'll admit my motives are at least partially selfish." Braced on one arm, his other palm cups Will's cheek and slowly slips down the column of his neck, skims knuckles over the dip of Will's pale waist and watches him squirm. "When you're beside me…"

Hannibal trails off into silence with a complicated expression, one of rapt intensity, and Will is pinned in place by the sharpness in his eyes. But his lips, when they part and dip and press against Will's cheek, are so very soft.

Will exhales gently and accepts the kiss at the corner of his mouth. "When I'm beside you…"

"…everything is simple," Hannibal finishes at long last. Each brush of their lips is not quite a kiss, but with the intimacy of the words between them, Will cannot deny the affectionate touch for what it is. Each word, a confession. "I simply feel, and I simply am, in a way that has never been simple for me before."

Will hums his amusement, his assent, his adoration. "Nothing about this feels simple to me," he admits. "It's all so complicated. I just know I want it enough to fight for it."

Hannibal rumbles a quiet sound that is neither a growl nor a purr. It sounds like *want.* “Would you fight for me, Will?”

“I already have.” Will swallows hard. Pushes his face against Hannibal’s cheek. Imagines the monstrous shadow of the Ripper, and thinks that perhaps he hasn’t fought very hard at all. Or maybe he has, and is even still in the midst of paying the price. “I still would.”

“Then I count myself fortunate to be among those you see worthy of your protection.” His fingers curl around the nape of Will’s neck and stroke so very gently through his curls, catching intermittently on tangles and picking them apart. “And admire your kindness to do so.”

Will’s not certain how to respond to that, really. It doesn’t feel like kindness. It feels like… possession. Hot-blooded temper, a true core of rage inside his gut that only softens around those he holds most dear. Margot. Hannibal. Those who don’t know the true depth of the danger surrounding them, and who Will must look out for to keep them safe.

Will noses at Hannibal’s temple. “Maybe it’s my motives that are selfish.”

“Then I welcome your selfishness, and sacrifice myself gladly to it.” Hannibal’s lips touch his hair, and Will bonelessly sighs. Melts against him, beneath him, and becomes lax in his arms. Faced with this kindness, guilt blooms inside him, even as the anger of the day before still picks at the very back of his mind. The many questions clamor for a way out from behind Will’s teeth. He can’t allow them to break free from him—how could he? How could he call into doubt all the things Hannibal has done for him? All his wisdom and kindness, gentle insight and patience? Question his love, his affection, and … for what?

No. Better to get his answers and see these questions once and for all laid to rest by the evidence. The evidence will exonerate Will’s suspicions, the truth will be dragged to light, and with the revelations Will so desperately desires, everything will finally make sense.

“I don’t need a sacrifice,” Will murmurs. “Just the truth.”

Hannibal’s cheek brushes the crown of his head, and when Will finally looks up, he is eclipsed by the shadow of his *true* beloved, drowning in his dark, intelligent eyes, and all the ferocity he sees there. It’s enough to send a thrill down Will’s spine, raw electricity.

“To the truth, then,” Hannibal replies softly, and curls in on Will to swiftly steal a kiss before they rouse for the day ahead. “And all its consequences.”

There’s nothing for Will to wear other than the gown—nothing, until Will emerges from the shower and finds clothing smartly folded on the bathroom counter. Charcoal slacks, a navy button-up, both cut tight to the lines of Will’s body, rather than the silhouette of Hannibal’s. No labels. Bespoke. Made for him.

Will’s chest is warm and his fingers tremble on the door handle as he emerges and descends the stairs; Hannibal’s eyes on him are heavy, assessing, approving, and Will cannot deny that despite the many questions and unsettled feelings that have followed him into the light of day, that regard fills him with

happiness. It's not wrong, he tells himself, to enjoy the attention Hannibal gives him. In fact, it's only right for him to enjoy the company of the man he's in love with, to feel pride at being wanted.

But as much as Will feels like he's lying by not mentioning what he saw, he can no more voice it aloud.

Let Jack Crawford give Will what he's asked for before he starts making assumptions.

It's probably nothing.

But it might be something.

There's a divide in Will's mind as Hannibal's hands fasten the belt of the coat around his waist with loving attention, brushes his fingers against Will's over the center console of the Bentley, fetches the garment bag from the backseat on Will's behalf, and helps him get it safely stored in his Volvo, which is parked in the hotel parking lot from the night before. In the midst of the deepest emotion he has ever felt for anyone else, there is a quiet but insistent corner of Will's mind that simply watches every movement, categorizes the strength of Hannibal's hands, the bright light in his eyes.

Will leans into Hannibal's weight, arms tight around his ribs, head tucked against his shoulder, and feels his heart beat in time with the soft, warm breaths that ruffle his hair. He soaks in Hannibal's scent in greedy lungfuls, his warmth from a strong embrace.

Will has never been one to deny his instincts, but he crushes down the tangent of anxiety as he allows himself to be kissed so slow and sweet that it makes his heart ache. He hates that he has doubts, but even his hatred cannot dispel them.

He just needs to be sure it's nothing at all, and then all of this can fade, be drowned in firelight and whiskey beneath the memories of one perfect night.

With Hannibal departed and Will safely ensconced in his Volvo, he pulls the spare silver cell from his locked glove box.

<< they caught up to me. i need your help.

The phone rings at once. With a huff, Will answers, and is immediately assaulted by the telltale sounds of speakerphone and a revving engine. "Jeez, that's loud."

"Sorry," Miriam bites back. Tires screech. *"Drug dealer, car chase, you know the drill. I didn't tell anyone, by the way."*

Will huffs an incredulous laugh. "Yeah, I know. Why the hell'd you call me while chasing a suspect?"

"She's not a very good getaway driver. I'll have her in a minute. Anyway, text messages are way easier to pull for evidence, you know. Call records don't tell anyone what was said."

"I was trying to assume I wouldn't get caught," Will mutters, and turns his car on. "It's irrelevant anyway. That's not how—" Will cuts himself off with a huff. "Listen, whatever. They want my help. I

can't be seen with them, obviously. Crawford's agreed to release the files to law enforcement. I can give him your contact information, but I obviously want to clear it with you first."

"Crawford?" Miriam asks with what sounds like a frown.

Will sighs. "He's an agent with the FBI's Behavioral Analysis Unit."

"You got an in with the BAU? Jesus, Graham."

Will pinches the phone between his cheek and shoulder, warming his hands on the defroster vents and rubbing his fingers together. "And if you do this, *you'll* have an in with the BAU. I need the files. I can't get them. You can get them, and I can get them from you. Are you in?"

"Fuck yeah, I'm in. Actually, I'm about to be out—I gotta go bust this chick. Crawford, you said?"

"Yeah—"

No sooner does he hear a mighty *crash* from the other end of the line, and Miriam hollering, *"Freeze! Police! Put your hands outside the window of the car where I can see them—"*

The line goes dead.

Will sighs. Texts Jack Crawford.

<< here's the contact information:

The hospital around lunchtime is a hub of chaos. That is, of course, an advantage for one who does not wish to be noticed, but looks for all intents and purposes as though they belong.

While nurses and doctors attend to afternoon meals and medications, Hannibal slips into the psychiatric ward. Frederick Chilton is scheduled to be working at the Bayview campus for the afternoon; a fact he shall plead ignorant to, should anyone stop him and ask him what he's doing. He's in his scrubs, his jacket, his hospital ID. From afar, who would know he shouldn't be here? And should they check the records and find he is not clocked in, well, it was a simple mistake; that he's not scheduled, well, he's known for his workaholic tendencies anyway, so who would be surprised?

The corridor where Frederick's office lies is predictably deserted. It is no effort at all for Hannibal to crouch and pick the simple, antiquated lock on the handle and allow himself inside. The office is dark, without windows as most interior offices within the hospital are. Hannibal extracts a pair of nitrile gloves from his pocket and puts them on, flips the switch for the fluorescent lights, and closes the door softly behind him.

There are a number of places where the notes could be, from the locked filing cabinet behind Frederick's desk, to the bookcase in the corner. Hannibal pauses, frowning at the metal structure, and weighing the likelihood that Frederick might keep what he seeks inside it. Instead, his eyes slide to the bookcase. Scans the spines of the tomes, and sees ten black leatherbound notebooks standing side by side. They are so plain and out of place, so unlike Frederick Chilton, that they catch his attention. A curious perusal confirms his suspicion—like Hannibal himself, Frederick keeps extensive logs of handwritten notes.

And within them is what he seeks.

Intake Interview, Psychological & Brain Sciences MHS — William "Will" S. Graham

The pages are full from top to bottom, the edges soft with wear. It's clear that Frederick has revisited many times over the years since the fateful encounter between them. The thought does not sit well with Hannibal for a reason he does not wish to consider quite yet.

Regardless. He's found what he's looking for, and what remains is what he wishes to do about it.

He could copy the pages, photograph them for later perusal. It would be the wisest course of action to duplicate them and retreat without Frederick being any the wiser that Hannibal has ever seen them. And yet…

The possessive creature that lives inside him picks at the seams of his carefully-tailored facade from the inside, snaps fragile threads with its claws, and creates a hole just large enough for it to stick its hand through. For it must be the monster's hand, rather than his own, that tears the pages bearing Will's name from the book's spine, leaving only the subtlest clues that anything has been removed at all. Until he holds them in his grasp, the white noise in his ears does not cease, and then there is no going back. No denying what he has done, and no undoing it.

Hannibal cannot even find it within himself to be sorry for it, though his mind whirs at a thousand miles per second in an attempt to decide his next steps.

Frederick will surely notice the loss sooner or later. Of course, Hannibal will leave no fingerprints, nothing to be found in terms of physical evidence. There will be no reason to suspect him, provided he is not caught we he leaves—but despite Hannibal's opinion of the man's psychological practices, Frederick Chilton is not a stupid man. When he inevitably learns of the attachment between Hannibal and Will, suspicions will grow. He might even be bold enough to confront Hannibal.

Or.

Or, Hannibal can peruse the notes at his discretion, and dispose of them in such a way that they will not only disappear, but redirect the blame. After all, it was only just a week ago that Freddie Lounds was blacklisted by hospital security. The chances are good that it's been at *least* that long since the last time Frederick allowed the memories to fester inside him.

Yes. Yes, that'll do nicely. The logistics of where and how he will implicate Freddie Lounds are yet to be seen, but Will would never doubt it of her, and her history would be damning enough to ensure Hannibal's presumed innocence.

It will be enough to eliminate the consequences of his impulsiveness in this matter. And in other matters… well, perhaps not so impulsive. Calculated, as such things should be. Carefully planned and expertly executed.

Hannibal returns the book and lets himself out of Chilton's office. He is not seen, nor is he questioned, and leaves the hospital with his prize, prideful as he has ever been.

The passenger seat of the Bentley is empty beside him. After the realizations of yesterday, he no longer has to wonder when he started noticing the absence. It aches inside him with a strange longing that he both cherishes and detests.

But if he has his way, Will's return is imminent sooner rather than later.

One more message, this one more direct than the last. Each more direct, until Will sees—until the truth is laid bare, pale and ethereal as Will had been beneath him. Until it, and Will, reach back for him.

Until he knows.

One way or another, until he knows.

There's a manila folder tucked between two books in the reference text section of the McKeldin campus library. Will licks his lips compulsively, and does not open the folder to read it, despite his best and immediate instinct to do so. Instead, he tucks it into his bag with trembling fingers. Counts to sixty in his mind Finds a book on investigative journalism and brings it to the front desk to check it out. Maintaining appearances.

He wants to know. He doesn't want to know.

He has to know.

Will walks back to his car bathed in the blood-red light of the sunset, still in the clothes that Hannibal gave him. The dress is a lonely thing across the back seat of his Volvo; Margot hasn't answered his texts about returning it to her, but she's always been somewhat of a lush. It's not uncommon for her to sleep into the evening following a major event like the Gala. She'll get back to him when she wakes up, and Will has more pressing matters at hand.

He puts his bag on the passenger seat as he starts toward home. His fingers clutch at the wheel, white-knuckled. The file feels like a physical presence. Oppressive. Smothering.

He shouldn't. Will knows he should wait until he's safely home, door locked and windows curtained. But the suspense is killing him, the desire to know is so strong, and—

He pulls over the car on the side of the highway and puts his hazard flashers on. Slaps at his driver's side visor as he's blinded by a wash of red, a glare that drowns out his vision. His eyes spark with color as he gradually regains his ability to see, and Will chokes on a bitter laugh when he realizes he is underneath that *goddamn* overpass.

Dread and desperate hope coalesce. Will opens the folder. Scans the list, and—

74. *Chevrolet Malibu, (2014), silver — District of Columbia: NT 6845*

It feels like a blow to the chest, or maybe one to the head, because Will is abruptly struck dizzy. He sits back in his seat. The passing cars make the Volvo shake, for it's surely his vehicle, and not Will himself shaking.

The Malibu was present in the parking garage at the National Press Club at the time of the murder. Just over a day later, he saw Hannibal driving it out of DC. A car that Will had never seen before, and has never seen again.

And Will never would have been in DC on the day of the murder, eating at a restaurant frequented by those horrified press correspondents, if not for—

“Stop it,” Will whispers. “Stop.”

Pay attention, Wilhelmina replies.

Will swallows hard.

No. *No.*

He will *not* allow his mind to make monsters where there aren’t any, there *has* to be some sort of reason. Hannibal has so many acquaintances, so many people he knows—he has never been anything but kind and protective and Will should just *ask.* Will should just ask him. Drive back to his house, or just call him right now—

But before Will can pick up the phone, it rings. He startles so badly the pages of the file slip out of the folder, past his legs, and pool in the footwell.

“Shit.” He scrambles for the phone, knocks over his bag with his trembling hands, desperately tries not to step on any of the documents. It’s his silver phone, the one for contacts, though the number on it is blocked. His heartbeat throbs in his throat as Will slides his finger across the screen to answer. He’s not in the mood for niceties. “Who is this and how did you get this number?”

“Graham.”

The relief and the tension rattle his bones, explosive and sudden in nature. His eyes close, and for a moment, he is so relieved to hear a familiar voice that he doesn’t question why. “Agent Crawford.”

“I need you to come in.”

Will stops breathing. For a moment, he can’t say anything at all.

Pay attention.

“There’s been another one,” Will says softly. He does not ask. His chest is tight, aching, pulsing, sore. All the things the Ripper has done to him in his dreams, Will now feels while he’s awake. He feels hollowed out with foreboding. His mind operates on two planes of thought at once, processing the information he has been given, and extrapolating those exponential extensions of what could be.

Might be.

The sound of a siren over the line, and the gunning of an engine. *“Yeah. It’s him.”*

To the truth, then, and all its consequences.

Will’s eyes burn. He bites hard on the inside of his cheek until he tastes blood, and despite the hot rush of it, he feels cold. “Where?”

Will arrives at the Rawlings Conservatory in silence. He didn’t turn the radio on as he drove in the dark. One last prayer for a kind and comforting word in Margot went unanswered, as expected. Will can’t blame her for it.

He’s not really in the mood to talk anyway.

The building reflects the blue lights of the emergency vehicles that surround it, stretching up into the sky in massive walls of glass. The rounded roof refracts a negative of the moon above. The building as a whole is a beacon of disaster, a broadcast easily spotted from miles away. Despite the frost that is already settling on the ground and the steaming clouds of Will’s breath coalescing in the air, the glass shows no hint of ice. The heat within must keep it warm enough to resist the inherent weather conditions outside; it makes sense, given the variety of botanical specimens that reside there. It’s an old structure, a historical one that dates back to the late 1800s.

Will’s always thought about visiting. He didn’t think it would be like this.

His hair is pushed up inside a knit hat; high heels discarded in the passenger footwell of his car that’s parked some miles back. His bare feet are jammed into a pair of winter boots that he usually keeps in the trunk for unexpected bad weather. The hems of the slacks, too, are jammed down inside them. They’ll be wrinkled by the time Will gets home.

Right now, he doesn’t care.

The soles of his boots crunch on the crushed stone path, approaching the side entrance that Jack directed him to by text. There’s no authorities on this side of the building; anyone watching the hubbub won’t see him enter here. None but Jack himself, who waits just inside the door. It swings open, and Will enters from the crisp, cool dryness to a muggy, oppressive heat that reminds him of home.

Jack wastes no time. “Victim was found at approximately 5:15pm by an employee who was closing down the facility, which officially closes at four o’clock. That means whoever did this had just over an hour to do their work.”

“That’s more than enough,” Will murmurs, and follows him through the towering trees on a well-maintained stone path. They head toward piercing pillars of light, set up on tripod-like structures made to illuminate outdoor scenes after dark. “What’s with the lights?”

Jack harrumphs. “Staff threw a fit when we suggested turning the overheads on. Said it would throw off the natural biorhythms of the plants if we turned on the full-spectrum lights after hours.”

Will nods. Under better circumstances, he might ask more questions. Now, he finds he can barely wait for silence. “I’ll need your people out of the way. No interruptions.”

A muscle twitches in Jack’s strong jaw, but to his credit, he does not immediately argue. “Any particular reason why?”

Will’s hand curls into a fist at his side. Fortunately, it’s concealed by the sleeve, just slightly too long. “I need to concentrate. And I don’t want any of them to see me. You promised me discretion.”

Jack can’t argue with that. It was, first and foremost, one of Will’s non-negotiable terms of this arrangement. Besides, Will doesn’t want to be seen. Not this time. Not by anyone, if he can help it. Not for this.

“Wait here,” Jack says. Will waits in the shadows as Jack rounds the bend in the path, into the light. “Alright! I need everyone to clear the room!”

Confused murmurs of the crime scene techs. If any of them could see him, Will might wince. As it stands, his heart is beating too fast, and his hairline is starting to dampen with sweat beneath the brim of his winter hat. He tells himself it's the temperature, but it's not. Not really.

"You heard me!"

Shuffling, grumbling—Will's starting to overheat as they file out. He unbuttons the collar of the coat, but it provides only paltry relief. Pulls off his gloves and jams them in his pocket, exposing his sweaty palms to the humid air. His feet, too, are starting to sweat. There's a faint fuzziness that's occupying his head that could very well be from the rise in temperature, but maybe it's just his nerves.

He doesn't even notice when Jack returns until a hand is on his shoulder, and Will jumps; Jack holds up his palms in surrender, though his brow furrows as he looks at Will. "What's wrong?"

"Overheated," Will mutters. His eyes are fixed beyond Jack, toward the light.

"You still have your hat on."

"My hair's distinctive," Will replies simply. Inhales through his nose, but it doesn't quite feel like a full breath. He unbuttons one more button, and rolls his neck restlessly. "It's fine. Are they gone?"

Jack eyes him suspiciously. "Yeah, they're gone. You can go in."

"Okay."

But he doesn't move. Balanced on a knife's-edge of a moment, he is paralyzed.

Jack stares at him. The weight of his eyes is tangible. "You asked for this."

"Shut up," Will whispers. "I know what I asked for." *And it wasn't this.*

Will ducks his head. His fingers shake as he undoes the buttons from top to bottom and shrugs off Hannibal's coat. It drops from his shoulders and pools on the ground. Will leaves it where it lies. With one hand, he drags the cap back off his head. Drops it, too, into the pile of his outer clothing. His hair sticks to his face, damp curls adhered to his skin in the humid air. Will rakes his fingers back through it and pulls it into a knot at the base of his neck. Impatiently pushes his bangs to the side and out of his vision, swipes at the sweat pooling in the hollows of his eyes with the backs of his knuckles, and presses until his vision goes white.

Then he stops. Lifts his head. Straightens his shoulders, his spine. Inhales deeply, and exhales slowly. He takes one step, and then another—measured, one foot in front of the other. He doesn't have enough confidence in this to be determined, but he can fake it.

He has to fake it.

The crime scene spotlights are bright enough to blind, a hollow, washed-out tint that makes the body almost heinous and grotesque. But Will can imagine it in the evening sun, see it as it was meant to be seen, bathed in gold and red, and in his mind, it's beautiful.

The body sits on a bench across from a bubbling pool in a manner that is almost peaceful. What stone he does not sit on is covered in buds and bloom and greenery—fronds of palm to dress the altar and prepare it for the offerings atop it: branches of lavender and lotus, clove and orchid, balsam and gardenia. Rich and colorful, carefully selected and expertly trimmed. They are sections not found in

this portion of the garden, brought here from somewhere else. And across the slender lap and resting in the crux of his folded hands, a single bloom of vibrant color: a bird of paradise.

The victim himself gives Will pause—hair is a deep, rich brown, curling over his forehead and around his ears, face clean-shaven and young. Pale, like him, gently freckled by the sun. Perhaps Will's age. Right around his height, his weight. He is dressed in a white tee-shirt and blue jeans, feet bare against the cobbled path. But in the front of his shirt, there is a slit that extends from collar to hem, slicing it in two. It exposes the gaping hollow inside the boy's chest, and the gilded door that extends from within.

A bird cage—antique, but in prime condition. And from the perfect section that has been excised from the boy's chest, Will can see that the form of the cage has taken the place of his ribs. All that would normally lie within them has been removed: no sign of the heart, the lungs, or any traces of bone, but for the flashes of remaining spine that press up against the bars at the back.

Within the cage is a bed of petals—by size and shape and the lingering fragrance, they've been plucked from roses. White roses. Bridal flowers. Ten, and atop each, a golden coin that holds some carved shape that he cannot make out quite yet.

At the center of them all rests a paper heart, folded onto a yellowing sheet that shows flashes of ink, words concealed by the origami shape. And above it, on the gilded perch, a hand-crafted paper bird that is not a crane or a swallow or a hummingbird—nothing so frail and pretty—but the strong and sturdy silhouette of an eagle, wings extended in the semblance of flight.

Will blinks rapidly. His eyes prickle and burn. His eyes are locked on those shapes inside the cage, each so carefully, so *tenderly* placed.

"Gloves," Will rasps. When he hears nothing, he turns back to face Jack. He feels fit to burst, to explode, and squares off against his dubious expression with a curl of his upper lip. "You want my insight and my experience? I know how to handle evidence, Agent Crawford, you know that very well.Your people had more than enough time to document the scene before I got here. Gloves."

Jack holds his eyes. Twitches, and tentatively licks his lips as he breaks eye contact with a blustering sigh. He plucks a nearby pair of nitrile gloves from the pop-up forensic stand nearby and holds them out to Will. "Be *careful.* "

Will does not deign to be insulted; he doesn't have time to bother. Jack knows his history and his exam scores better than anyone else. Certainly better than—

Will plucks them wordlessly from Jack's hands and pulls them on. He doesn't allow the thought to finish as he approaches the body and crouches before it, peering inside.

Upon the coins are the inscriptions of stars. The Ten of Pentacles.

Will exhales shakily as he gently, so very gently, extracts the paper heart. Finds the seam, and through the thin layer of nitrile, lets it free. The paper unspools readily into a tissue-thin page printed with text, the words upon it growing clearer and clearer as the page unfolds and becomes a message-bearer once more.

Sympathy

I know what the caged bird feels, alas!

When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;

When the wind stirs soft through the springing grass,

And the river flows like a stream of glass;

When the first bird sings and the first bud opes,

And the faint perfume from its chalice steals—

I know what the caged bird feels!

I know why the caged bird beats his wing

Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;

For he must fly back to his perch and cling

When he fain would be on the bough a-swing;

And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars

And they pulse again with a keener sting—

I know why he beats his wing!

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,

When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore—

When he beats his bars and he would be free;

It is not a carol of joy or glee,

But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,

But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings—

I know why the caged bird sings!

Will's lips part. He breathes swiftly, shallowly.

And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars

And they pulse again with a keener sting

In the shape of a heart, small and fragile, but above it, the strength and majesty of an eagle caged—

I wish I could set you free from this, beloved. The scars he's left still sting you, perhaps more now than they did before.

I wish I could set you free.

There is no warning. One moment he sees the words, and in the next, they are blurred beyond comprehension. Will's eyes burn, well over, drip down his cheeks, and his breath leaves him in one sharp, soft, *"Oh."*

It's Hannibal.

It's always been Hannibal.

And he didn't see it. Didn't *want* to see it.

"What does it say?" Jack asks.

Reality hits Will all at once. It it a vise around his lungs, his heart, and squeezes until he is ready to explode. He's standing in the middle of a fucking crime scene—The Chesapeake Ripper's crime scene, *Hannibal's* crime scene, and—

Will opens his mouth, inhales slowly, evenly, and blinks until he can see again. Until his eyes clear, and though every time he thinks about it, he threatens to fall apart again, but.

Will clears his throat. Swallows hard. Embraces calm, Wilhelmina's stoic and steady void, and says, "It's a poem. *Sympathy,* by Paul Laurence Dunbar."

Jack's footsteps approach from behind him, a contemplative tone to his voice. *"I know why the caged bird sings."*

It's nearly enough to send Will into hysterics. He swallows again. "Yeah." His nose is clogged, so he breathes through his mouth. "This is a, um." Will holds out the poem to Jack. Letting it go feels like handing away *his* heart, his hopes, his dreams. Everything Hannibal awakened in him. "It was folded into a heart. It's a love note."

Jack's lips press together firmly as he looks down at the inked letters. "So you were right. This is about you."

Will bites back a sharp bark of laughter. Maybe it's a sob.

Fuck.

Fuck.

"Jack, I don't feel well," Will whispers. "I think I need some air."

The look Jack levels him with is accusing, disappointed. "You went through three years with top marks in forensics. You were set to graduate with honors, accepted to a prestigious Master's program

in psychology—”

Something in Will snaps and breaks.

The tears well up and over, and Will points at the body with one shaking hand, and turns his burning eyes to Jack Crawford. “That’s *me,* Jack! That’s supposed to be *me!* And I need just one—” his voice breaks “—just *one* fucking minute, okay?”

Jack Crawford falls silent. It’s with some slow and strange horror that Jack looks at the victim and sees something that has been so blatantly obvious to Will from the beginning that he cannot comprehend at all how a seasoned FBI agent ever missed it. But then Jack’s lips press together into a firm, thin line, and in the pale light of the crime scene spotlights, he blanches. When he looks back, he doesn’t meet Will’s eyes at all. “Alright,” he says. “Go on, Graham.”

“Thank you,” Will sneers, and doesn’t feel very thankful at all.

He leaves his coat, his hat, on the floor as he goes. He can barely stand to look at them as he passes them by, despite the fact that his sweating has already flipped to shivers. Will leaves the scene with only one thing in mind, and that’s escape. Escape. Escape.

He bursts through the doors and out onto the frosted grass. He makes it no further than that before he collapses to his knees and empties what little lingers in his stomach onto the ground. The cold pierces him, surrounds him, binds him, and within seconds, Will is shaking down to his bones—the kind of cold that even scalding water can’t fix, the kind of existential horror that can’t be patched by band-aids and gauze, soft touches and empty promises.

Declarations of love that—

The sounds that wrench their way from Will’s lungs aren’t human. They are the keening cries of a wounded animal: afraid, abandoned, and alone.

Betrayed.

There’s no solace to be found. Nothing Will can rationalize or empathize that makes this any better. There is only the chilling reality of the manipulation he’s faced, the expert maneuverings of the very killer Hannibal always so subtly defended, and, God.

God.

It was so obvious. It was always there, all along.

Will chokes on his breath, on his spit, and doubles over himself. He has to tell Jack. He *has* to, and yet —

He may have had his hand held, he may have been led down this path with every touch and every kind word, guided into this silken, sticky web of adoration and loyalty, but even *this* cannot sever it completely. He can’t tell Jack. It’s the one thing he absolutely cannot do.

But neither can Will forget. Neither can he forgive.

It’s a terrible and ugly thing to find himself lonely in the world once more. It’s a sensation that Hannibal had nearly burned out of him, and because of it, Will already loves him.

He’s already in love, and it’s already too late.

Maybe it always has been.

And in this moment, all Will wants is to call him. To *beg* Hannibal to pick him up, bring him back to his home, his bed, and Will's certain he would do it. It's what he always wanted, to stoke that fascination, that unyielding fealty, ever since they met—

—and Will was *so* blind.

Chapter End Notes

[rebloggable chapter post]

3:1

Chapter Notes

> Thank you so, so much to everyone who has commented!! I'm so far behind, I know I need to catch up, but I promise I'll get on that soon. OMG y'all and please go check out the lovely art inspired by Headlines by @Nirvana_088 on Twitter! Thank you so so so so much <3 <3
>
> I hope you're all prepared for the ride this part will take us on. Even if you think you are, you're probably not. So buckle up, and let's get ready to rumble. We're in the last leg of the story, but we're by no means close to the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s late when Will pulls into the driveway. Well after midnight, certainly. He’s exhausted. Shaken. For a while, he doesn’t even bother to unbuckle his seat belt.

Even just a few days ago, he wouldn’t have dared to linger. The uncertainty of where the Ripper may be lurking, lying in wait for him, was fear enough to keep him moving from one secure place to the next. House to car. Car to school. School to Hannibal’s home. Hannibal’s home back to his house.

He can’t even call his house a home in good conscience anymore. No, fool that he was, he had unknowingly made himself at home in the monster’s den instead, and Hannibal had stood aside and watched with interest as Will tangled their lives more thoroughly together. Made himself reliant. Threw himself headfirst into the arms of the first person who showed him affection, the first person who looked at him without judgement or fear, and—

God, he should have known. He should have fucking known.

Will gets out of the car.

He’s not afraid of the dark anymore.

Wilhelmina coils beneath his skin like a serpent, venom embodied. Will feeds from her. Keeps his head steady, his jaw set, as he ascends the porch steps and unlocks his front door. It’s late enough that Winston doesn’t even rouse to greet him, and Will can’t blame him; he closes the door behind himself, but doesn’t bother to lock it.

He stands in the darkened entryway of this place, this little house that was once his safe haven from the world. His boat on the sea. But he feels himself sinking, capsizing, pulled to the depths by devastation that coils around his ribs and crushes the paper heart inside him.

For lack of a better option, Will had been forced to don Hannibal’s coat at the crime scene and wear it home. He sheds it now. Kicks off his heavy, insulated boots. Will stands barefoot in his living room in nothing more and nothing less than what Hannibal has given him.

From the very beginning, from the very first night, Hannibal had known exactly who Will was chasing. And when Will had left him that night, Hannibal had killed Andrew Caldwell, knowing it would bring Will back.

Everything, *everything* was a lie.

And knowing this now, knowing what Will knows, he is faced with the abhorrent reality that Hannibal may not love him at all.

He's charismatic enough to fake it. He knows all the right looks to give, the right touches to offer. So many pretty, empty words. He left the Hanged Man on the overpass and watched the destruction unfold. He used that opportunity to bind Will to him. From there, the Press Club murder, the Ace of Wands. And now this, the Ten of Pentacles. The declarations take a different tone now that Will can see both sides of it. They look less like love and more like the extended manipulation of a clever, curious creature who just wants to see what will happen.

Will fell for it. Will fell for *him.*

Hannibal had gotten the cover story and the alibi he wanted all along. Some bright, shiny, stupid thing that could validate his art to a broader audience, and protect his professional reputation with a convenient scandal.

And Will had let him do it.

His lip curls in a slow snarl. Something inside him is fracturing, splintering into sharp shards of glass. It's hurt. It's betrayal. It is unfiltered, raw-edged rage, and it no longer has to be mindful of witnesses.

Will breaks.

Everything and anything is fair game. Tables upended, chairs kicked over, Will destroys because it feels good, and in this moment, he is only a wild thing. There is no concern for value. There is no worry for the mess he'll have to clean up. Winston's paws scrabble at the hardwood floor as he bolts into the other room, and Will destroys his house because it's no longer his home and he *hates* that.

It's the only thing he can do.

Makeup scatters across the floor. Books, papers, bags, knick-knacks. Counter tops swept off with harsh, angry sweeps of his arms—his fly-tying materials, his jewelry. Precious things that cease to have meaning to him in the wake of… *this.*

He had really, truly thought Hannibal was on his side. *Their* side, for them and no one else.

But Hannibal has never been on any side but his own.

Will's muscles ache, his lungs burn, and after some time, he can't keep going. The night is catching up to him. He goes to his knees in a pile of debris, curls up on his side and undoes the buttons of the shirt Hannibal gave him. Kicks off his pants. Lies in his underwear on the floor in the living room, hair tangled and askew and damp with sweat. Will shivers, and his arm pulses with a dull ache at the rough treatment Will has given it tonight.

Will reaches out blindly through the nest of his belongings scattered on the floor; finds an old sweatshirt and pulls it over his body like a blanket. It's a paltry comfort, but it's better than being exposed. His energy has completely drained, and exhaustion is settling in. Even so, Will lies there restlessly until he draws a cushion from his overturned chair to his torso, rests his cheek upon it like

he had lain on Hannibal's chest just this morning. It's too soft, too cold, and the flex of Will's arms around it isn't quite right, but it's his only relief.

He sleeps fitfully among the wreckage of his life, his little boat, his safe port in a storm. All of it is gone now, crushed to ruins as the tempest Hannibal has created rages on around him. All Will can do is tread water, hope he can keep his head above water through the night without succumbing to the rushing tide of his bleeding heart.

It's still dark when Will startles awake. He is yanked from his doze by an explosion of loud noise. He bares his teeth instinctively, lifts his head and focuses on the source of the sound with sharp eyes—

Someone is pounding on his door.

Winston skitters over the cluttered floor, barking at the entryway; Will has a moment of abject panic when he realizes he never locked up, and that's likely the next step this interloper will try. Here he is in the middle of a mess of his own making, shielded beneath a thin sweatshirt and lingerie. Not exactly the best armor, and given the state of his living room, Will's concept of the location of his belongings is foggy at best. He pulls the sweatshirt on, but that doesn't help him with pants. He uses the sound of Winston's racket to mask his movements as he stands—

Somewhere in the room, his phone starts to vibrate, and the pounding starts anew, accompanied by a muffled, familiar sob.

His heart seizes. The mood shifts, and aggression becomes urgency. Will leaps over the mess on the floor and wrenches the door open. Tear-stained and splotchy, it's Margot on the other side. She cradles her right arm close to her torso, and when Will shoos Winston away and flips the light switch on, there is a bruise blooming across her jaw, and a red hand spread around her throat.

If Will's heart had been wounded and bleeding before, it has surely now transformed to stone—a cold, glittering diamond at his core, with no purpose but to be unbreakable.

Margot hiccups. She blinks rapidly through her tears, at Will's fucked up appearance and the state of his house behind him. "What *happened?* " she rasps.

"Don't worry about it," Will replies firmly, and stands aside. "Get in here right now."

Her expression crumbles—her royal flush dethroned, her house of cards toppling, her composure becoming a disaster as she nods and steps by him, and Will closes the door to shut out the winter cold. But it soaks into him; takes root, and grows. A freezing feeling, all-encompassing.

He knows what happened here. He doesn't have to ask. But as Will turns, he sees Margot framed by the destruction he's wrought of their once-safe space, and thinks that maybe this has been inevitable all along, for both of them.

"Mason?" Will whispers.

Margot's lip quivers and she nods.

Will's hands clench at his sides, hard enough to dig his nails into flesh. "Does your dad know?"

Margot nods again.

Will closes his eyes. Hisses slowly, angrily between his teeth, a warning rattle that grows in volume. He starts to shake. Sees red when he opens his eyes. “Tell me he’s in jail right now, Margot. Tell me they did something.”

Her mouth pulls in a terrible twisted expression, an ugly grimace of pure despair. Her chin ducks, defeated. She shakes her head and starts to cry.

Will’s fist twitches hard at his side. He wants nothing more than to lash out, to hit the wall, to *hurt* someone, but doing so would only traumatize Margot further.

Will thought he knew fury. He was wrong.

The feeling Hannibal draws from him is hurt, betrayal, anger.

But this. *This* is hatred.

“Sit on the bed,” Will says. It’s the only thing still standing, though the blankets have been pulled from the mattress and scattered by his rage. “I’m getting dressed, and then we’re going to the hospital.”

She looks as though she might argue. But when she does, her arm slips further down her abdomen from where she’s been clutching it close, and Margot cries out with pain. Just the sound of it is enough to tear out Will’s heart.

He wastes no time. There’s no such thing as modesty between them. He strips bare, fishes clean cotton underwear off the floor, fleece-lined jeans and a heavy button down shirt. Flips his head over, and draws the mess of his curls up into a severe bun. Slips into the bathroom and splashes cold water on his face, then wipes away the last traces of his makeup. His stubble is growing in, and there are dark, swollen circles beneath his eyes, but Will doesn’t have time to care.

He goes to the kitchen. Lets Winston out the back door, and makes himself busy digging out the ice packs he uses to transport his fish. At least they’re clean; still, Will wraps them in a kitchen towel. Lets Winston back in. Pours out his water and gives him some fresh, and puts down a scoop of dog food, and gifts him with one good, long scritch behind the ears.

It’s been a rough night for everyone. Unfortunately, it’s about to get worse.

Will snatches up the ice packs and goes back to Margot. It hasn’t been long, but she’s shivering—not dressed for the weather, that’s for damn sure. She must’ve come to him in a hurry. Will’s glad for it, but not for the circumstances.

He sits beside her on the mattress; he doesn’t ask for her arm, but even one tender touch is enough for him to know it’s broken from the way she flinches. “I need to splint this before we go anywhere.”

Margot bares her teeth, but tensely nods. Will springs into action; that fucking thing is around here somewhere, he knows he saw it when he was wrecking the living room, so where *is* it—

Will snarls triumphantly and emerges from beneath an overturned chair with the cast. Margot watches him with wide, wary eyes that have too many questions that Will is not yet ready to answer. Might not ever be ready to answer, and wouldn’t know how to answer them even if he could.

It takes a lot of swearing to get Margot's arm into the splint, but it's better than nothing. From there, Will scans the floor behind him—finds a light, gauzy infinity scarf and makes a sound of satisfaction. He loops it around Margot's head and underneath her good arm, and through a series of pained whimpers, helps her situate it inside the cradle of the scarf like a makeshift sling. Settles the ice packs on top.

Then he looks down, and sees Hannibal's coat. He picks it up. Pulls his phone from the pocket of it. Stares down at the screen, that only lists one missed call from Margot. Nothing from Hannibal.

Nothing from Hannibal, because to the best of his knowledge, nothing is wrong. To him, all is the same as they left it this morning. The world has not fundamentally shifted on its axis.

Will sweeps Hannibal's coat around Margot's slender shoulders, and helps her slip her good arm into the sleeve. It's not nearly enough to keep her warm when paired with a thin sweater and tweed pants; Will digs in the hall closet to find her a hat and proper winter scarf, old and misshapen and mismatched, but as warm as one could hope for.

She looks up at Will with red-rimmed eyes, glassy and bloodshot. She's still shaking, dripping tears. But she looks at him, and absorbs the rough-lined shape of him, and asks, "What happened, Will?"

Will sets his jaw. Jams his phone in the pocket of his jeans, and snags his wallet from its place on the floor. "There's been another murder. I saw it up close." He stands straight, pats his pockets. Phone, wallet: check. "I need your keys."

Margot is wide-eyed as she processes that information, regards the wreckage with a new sort of apprehension that's clearly visible. If it's bad enough that Will did *this,* how bad must it be? He can see the flicker of the thought cross her face. She's always been so open to him. "My keys?"

Will nods once. "Your car is faster, and I'm not stopping for gas."

Margot laughs once. It's a wet sound, startled from her. This is, Will thinks, maybe the worst he's ever seen her. Not solely in aesthetics, but the state of her emotions. Her vulnerability. The bruises around her throat are starting to darken, and his voice is raspy from the aftermath of Mason choking her.

The mental image of it fills his mind. Will's ears ring until he can no longer hear anything at all. He's fixated on those hand prints, the moving false memory of a situation he wasn't there for: Mason caught her off-guard with the hit to the face, and only got more violent as the power of it filled his vile mind and excited him—

"Will," Margot says. She's standing in front of him, eyes gleaming with tears. She's scooped his arm up on her good one, hand twisted around to press the key against his palm. His *bleeding* palm. But her eyes are not on the blood, only his face.

Will inhales through his nose. The copper tang of it is harsh on his nose, along with the scent of their nervous sweat, the woolen musk of winter outerwear.

Focus. Focus. He's trying not to turn it around in his mind, not to become lost in the vision of striking Mason, choking him *back*—

Margot has to come first. Margot needs his help, and she can't wait. Will takes her keys, takes her hand, shoves his feet in his work boots, and leads her out of the house.

He doesn't lock the door behind him. The only monster he knows is the one he's headed for.

A button on the key fob starts the car before they're in it; the LED headlights illuminate Will's house in brilliant bluish light as Margot's sleek Lexus coup purrs to life. It's a beautiful vehicle, the kind of thing Will normally wouldn't dare touch for fear of its sheer worth. It's funny how being around Hannibal has changed his priorities.

Will opens the passenger door and helps her in; Margot sniffles as Will buckles her seat belt for her, and whispers a quiet *thanks* that Will can't answer. He's too busy trying to keep the ferocious thing inside him locked behind his teeth. The cold air against his skin does him some good, but not enough. There's only his button-up standing between Will and the full force of a pre-dawn November morning, and only the cold standing between Will and his inner monster.

He closes her door and stalks around the car. He feels like an animal, a predator, the veneer of his humanity worn too thin. He gets into the driver's seat with singular purpose and straps himself in. Takes a moment to adjust to the fine leather interior, the pristine manual transmission, the screen built into the dash that displays the coup's interior climate and gas consumption. Margot reaches out with shaky fingers to turn on the heated seats. Will's already burning so cold he feels hot.

Will glances over at her as he backs out of the driveway and heads out of Wolf Trap. She is pale with drawn determination, a wounded soldier going back into battle.

Will intends to see her win the war.

He pulls his phone from his pocket with one hand and hits the directional with the other. Merges onto the on-ramp, and onto the empty three-lane highway. He shifts gears once, twice, again. The engine snarls, but the suspension barely jostles.

The phone rings. Twice. Three times. Four.

His voice, when it comes, is warm with greeting, but thick with concern, so falsely sincere it makes Will's chest hurt. *"Will, it's late. What are you still doing up?"*

He bares his teeth. "Are you at work?"

*"That happens to be why **I'm** awake, yes."* He can hear a certain caution in Hannibal's voice, one he never noticed before. It doesn't just sound like loving worry anymore, and Will hates that. He hates that he notices the change. He hates that he notices it's *not* a change. *"Are you alright?"*

Will parts his jaws. God, just the sound of it makes him want to *bite.* "I need you to go to your office. Don't take any more patients. I'll be there in forty-five minutes."

There's a dead, hollow silence. Margot glances over at him, teeth clenched against the pain she's feeling. Hannibal, on the other line, says nothing at all. His mind must be racing. He must suspect—and Will wants to be furious with him, he wants to unleash every ounce of his rage on him right now and *know* that Hannibal would deserve it, but he can't.

He can't.

Margot needs him to keep it together, so he can't.

"I need your help," Will admits shakily.

Hannibal exhales. Whatever the hell *that* means, Will doesn't know. His eyes narrow on the horizon. *"What's happened?"*

“Margot needs medical attention. I’m bringing her to you.”

The sound of footsteps echoing loud in a hall; Hannibal must be moving, even as he says, *“If it’s a dire emergency, you should bring her to the nearest hospital. I can meet you—”*

Will lets out a short, sharp bark of laughter that is not at all humorous. “It’s an emergency, but it’s not dire.” Will tosses the words around in his mind before he says them, rolls them on his tongue. Despite the acrid taste of the admission, it’s true. “I don’t trust any other doctor with this, Hannibal. But I trust you.”

The Chesapeake Ripper is a perfectionist in everything he does. Top of his field, unparalleled skill. Hannibal is an accomplished surgeon, a fantastic doctor. His pride would accept nothing less. It’s only sensible for Will to trust him with Margot’s care. It’s nothing personal. It’s not.

It’s *not.*

But the soft murmur of, *“Will.”* in his ear makes his heart skip a beat, anyway.

Will can’t listen to him lie, so he cuts Hannibal off before he can say anything gentle, anything sweet, any of his blatant manipulations. “Please just wait for us. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

He means to hang up on Hannibal. But as he pulls the phone away from his ear and searches for the end call button, he hears Hannibal reply, *“Drive safely, mylimasis.”*

Will chokes down the reflexive *I love you* that longs to escape him. Instead, he ends the call, and presses the gas pedal to the floor.

Hannibal waits impatiently for Will to contact him again. His mind churns with curiosity, with concern.

Will sounded… *different.* Cold. Not so unlike last night as he bared his fangs and flexed his claws, and Hannibal cannot be certain, but is reasonably confident that if Margot is wounded, it’s at the hands of her swine of a brother, blatant sadist that he is.

Hannibal’s fingertips tap rhythmically against his desk. For a moment, he almost dared to think—

But Will may not have even heard about it yet, and if Will’s already under strain from this unfortunate happenstance, Hannibal wouldn’t want to push him too hard too soon. The scene he left for Will is nuanced, layers of symbolism he’ll need his whole presence of mind to dissect and analyze. There are enough clues there that, if Will is as clever as Hannibal believes, he’ll see it once he has some time to reflect on the matter.

He doesn’t want to rush it. He’s just… anticipating the dissolution of these unnecessary lies.

Perhaps it’s impulsive, perhaps too heavy-handed to hope that Will comes to this conclusion on his own, but it feels more genuine, more organic to allow that realization to grow roots. He wants Will to know. He wants that confrontation, that emotional upheaval, to soothe his doubts and concerns and leave this behind. He’s tiring of the hypotheticals, of watching Will live in agony and awe, a thread of constant fear that is slowly strangling the life and vibrancy from him.

He wants to see Will thrive. He wants it for both of them, together.

He only has to wait for Will to realize.

He just has to be patient—

Someone knocks. Hannibal sits up straight, and checks his phone; no missed messages. But a second insistent, impatient knock leaves little doubt who's on the other side. Strange that Will wouldn't text him to mention they were arriving: at the very least, to have Hannibal open the hospital side entrance and hasten their journey.

But when his office door swings open, it's undoubtedly Will waiting for him. He's wind-burned, nose and cheeks chapped red; he vibrates some manic, frenetic energy that manifests as trembling limbs and exposed, pointed teeth, dilated pupils that indicate the adrenaline rush of his fight-or-flight response. He stands in front of Margot like an attack dog. Like Hannibal is a threat she must be defended from, and not the very person he sought out in the hopes of seeing her treated.

Will *is* different. Very nearly unhinged.

"Will," Margot murmurs, and his shoulders hunch. He ducks his head, breaks eye contact with Hannibal, and steps aside. Not *toward* Hannibal, no—rather, *away* from him, providing uninterrupted access to Margot Verger.

He has a medical duty to the injured. He knows that. And it is only because he agreed to help Will that he is even a little bit focused on Margot at all. But she notices Hannibal's lingering stare, his deepening intrigue and concern, and her expression is one of worry for a friend.

Undoubtedly, something is wrong.

"Miss Verger," Hannibal says carefully, mindful of her teary eyes, her smudged makeup made more ghastly by the unforgiving fluorescent lights. So, too, are the stark and darkening bruises that stain her cheek and delicate throat. "Very nice to see you again, though unfortunately not under these circumstances."

"Likewise," Margot whispers. She attempts a shaky smile, the product of her good breeding and excellent raising, despite the brutish men who preside over her life. Her eyes, though, linger on Will, and she reaches out one hand to tug on the hem of his shirt.

She's wearing Hannibal's coat: the very one he gifted to Will, that Will has scarcely taken off since the first time Hannibal put it on him. It is slung around her shoulders like a mantle, one arm pushed through one sleeve, the other suspended in a makeshift sling around her neck. It's packed well with what appears to be a kitchen towel, and Hannibal catches glimpses of what he assumes are cold compresses—and a very familiar velcro splint. This, at least, gives some insight to the depth of Will's care for Margot Verger, and the reason why he's so affected by her injury.

Perhaps.

"If you'll follow me to the examination room," Hannibal says, and closes the door behind him as he steps out of the office. "I'd like to assess the extent of your injuries."

Margot nods once, silently, and Will says nothing at all. Hannibal won't deny that Will's continued silence is uncharacteristic and thus unsettling. Hannibal's concern for him is not unmerited. He takes a step closer; Will flinches as though struck.

No, Hannibal decides with a deep and darkening wave of emotion, something that threatens grievous harm to whatever has put Will in this state. *Something is most certainly not right.* "Will?"

Hannibal watches the flutter of his throat, his pounding pulse. Will doesn't look up, but does slowly reach out, and Hannibal meets his hand in the middle as it twines into his own. Will grips hard enough to ache, to whiten his knuckles.

Hannibal holds fast, squeezes once. "Darling—"

"I'm fine," Will says, short and dismissive. Abrupt. Sharp-edged. "Take care of Margot. Please."

What Hannibal wants is to draw Will into his office, into his lap, pull the things that haunt him out from inside him, one by one. But short of that opportunity, he will simply have to bide his time and appease where he can. "Alright," he soothes. Lifts his head to look at Margot, and offers a single, genteel nod. "If you'll follow me…"

Though his hold doesn't loosen, at least Will doesn't let go of his hand—though he makes himself appropriately scarce when they reach the examination room and Hannibal proceeds with his work. He takes custody of a chair most usually meant for friends and family and closes his eyes, tips his head back against the wall. It might almost be mistaken for exhaustion, if Will weren't still radiating that undercurrent of anxiety and violence.

Upon inspection, Margot's throat and trachea are bruised; Hannibal applies ointment to reduce the swelling and conceals them beneath layers of gauze, with Will's watchful eyes resting heavily upon him. The bruise on her face is deep, but her jaw is intact and unbroken. Her arm, however, is another matter. "It's a clean break," Hannibal says not long after as he looks through the x-ray film. Turns his attention half-toward Will. "You were right to splint it. The bones have already set, we simply need to cast."

Will offers a silent nod, a shadow puppet echoing Margot's mannerisms. Hannibal's lips press together in disappointed displeasure at not being able to engage him; he meets Margot's gaze quite by accident, and decides to take what he can get. Perhaps involving her in conversation will draw Will out of his self-imposed shell. "I hope it's not presumptuous of me to guess it was your brother who did this to you."

In his peripheral vision, Will twitches. Margot glances at him. "It's not presumptuous if you're right."

Though it is one of the oldest and best-known sins of humanity, Hannibal cannot abide violence against one's siblings. It's the duty and privilege of the elder child to look out for the younger. To take advantage of that inherent power is shameful, dishonorable—not that Hannibal would ever make the mistake of thinking Mason Verger is, in any way, honorable.

Hannibal sets the linen protective padding on his work table. He hesitates when he gets to the fiberglass wrap. "Any preference for color?"

Margot blinks slowly. Offers a pretty, faltering smile. "Red."

It's not what he would have guessed, but Hannibal inclines his head and lifts the red wrap out. He starts with the first layer, the soft sounds of linen bandage being unrolled the only noise for a time. But as it often does, his curiosity gets the better of him. "Was there anything in particular that caused Mason to attack you?"

Margot's lips thin and press together. Her eyes nervously flicker to Will and back.

Hannibal's brows lift slowly. It stands to reason that Will's rebuttal to Mason's violence at the banquet may very well be the reason for his outburst. But if that's the case, based on her reaction alone, Hannibal would have to guess Will is blessedly unaware of that fact—and likely to react poorly if the truth were to become known.

He doesn't intend to push her. Hannibal can already tell what she isn't saying, and won't make her weather the discomfort of hurting Will emotionally when he's already so fragile.

Perhaps it's not my business, he means to say, and stop the inquiry before it begins. But like a wraith, like some creature, Will lifts his head. His expression is blank, his eyes flat as they settle on Margot. "Why *did* he attack you, Margot?"

Will's focus is sharp as a needle, and just as unforgiving—Hannibal watches him spear her with his eyes, pin her under the weight of his full attention. She freezes. Will does not relent: he keeps her there, forced to endure his silence, or to fill that silence with her own truth.

She breaks in seconds. It's a masterful play by Will. One that backfires on him spectacularly.

"He recognized the dress," Margot whispers. "...your dress. *My* dress."

Hannibal sees the exact moment it clicks. It's the very same moment that Will stops breathing. That the blue extinguishes from his eyes and paints them solely black. That they begin to glitter with something terrible, something ominous. Something Hannibal recognizes instantly and intimately: the immediate precursor to murder. The realized decision to kill.

Will swallows. He is so still, so inhuman, so beautiful in this moment; Hannibal cannot look away from him.

"He hurt you because of me," Will says. It's not a question. "To get back at me. He hurt you, not because he gives a damn about your life, but because he wanted to wound me by hurting something I care about, and I care about you."

Margot flinches.

The flat cruelty of the words astounds even Hannibal. "Will."

"No, he—" Margot cuts in. Ducks her chin, lowers her eyes. "He's right." She doesn't say it like a victim, or like one drenched in self-pity. She says it like one who has realized their disadvantage in life, and has been plotting furiously to overthrow it. It's an admirable trait, one Hannibal can deeply respect. He sees now why Will likes her.

"Your brother is a sadist who delights in suffering," Hannibal says, albeit with a gentler tone than Will had managed. He softens himself for her benefit, but primarily for Will's. He trims the padding with steady hands, and picks up the red fiberglass wrap. Tests the tension, and starts to coil it securely, but not tightly, around her arm. "You are the closest accessible person to make a victim. And he will continue to victimize you as long as he continues to not face consequences for his actions."

Will sits forward, elbows on knees. His fingers fold over the lower portion of his face, so it is only his eyes Hannibal sees, far-off and distantly focused, when Will says, "Then maybe he should be made to face consequences."

Margot smiles; a tight, small, pained little thing. "You know as well as I do that no one's ever done anything about it. Mason's always been a monster."

Will's eyes snap to hers and hold. "That doesn't make him the best of them."

Hannibal's lips softly part. His tongue touches the inside of his teeth. He looks away from Will and redirects his attention to carefully molding Margot's cast so it doesn't restrict her blood flow. He's mindful of it, even as he himself feels restricted. His breath. His pulse. The pressure of it is immense.

The best. Hannibal doesn't have to imagine the monster upon whom Will would bestow that title, and the pleasure of that knowledge burns brightly inside him. The best of all monsters, the most savage. The most ruthless, the most dedicated.

Will lets out a harsh breath. Drops his face into his hands, and exhales in a hiss. "I promised him I'd gut him if he hurt you in front of me. So he hurt you behind my back like the coward he is. I just—" Will falls silent, then lifts his head slowly. He stares at nothing, until something snaps into place there in his eyes. His voice is soft, so soft. "It's a dare."

Retaliation, plain and simple. A taunt. Hannibal wonders if Mason Verger is just that cruel or just that stupid, unable to see the creature that stalks the expansive forests of Will's mind. Though if Will is to whet his appetite on a first kill, Hannibal cannot imagine a more deserving pig. But Will is inexperienced, untried. He'll require the steady hand of a master to guide his design when the time comes.

He's certain it's only a matter of *when.*

Margot is pale, looks down at her cast with a pinched expression as Hannibal trims the ends of the fiberglass wrapping. "It's warm."

"That will be the fiberglass fusing," Hannibal replies. "The cast is sturdy, but not overly thick. It should hold strong against bumps and scrapes, but in order for me to make it withstand hard impacts, it would have taken more wrapping, and a greater increase in temperature." He holds her eyes and makes sure he understands him—*make sure Mason doesn't touch it.*

"Oh, don't worry." There's a hard, exasperated edge to Margot's voice. "Daddy won't do anything if Mason takes it out on me, but he won't let Mason hit me again 'til I'm healed, either. Unless Mason gets around him. And he always does. It escalates 'til he hurts someone else and has to go to court, or until he gets sent away on a *business trip* for a few weeks."

"Could you not file a police report?" Hannibal asks, primarily out of duty to the law within his profession—but his lips press together with the undeniable concession that money like the Vergers possess is able to make *anything* disappear, least of all lawsuits between siblings.

"You know as well as I do that there's no point in bothering." Margot offers him a wan smile. "Thanks for trying, though. Am I all done?"

"With the casting, yes. It'll take about thirty minutes to completely set, and as Will can attest, it's important to keep it dry while you're healing."

Margot slips down off the examination table, and Will is at her side in an instant to inspect her cast. He's attentive, steadying her as she wobbles precariously on her feet; Will's jaw is tense, his eyes hard. It would not be difficult for Hannibal to mistake them as siblings—though they are both on flat feet, with a modest heel, Margot would be almost an identical height; similar body size and weight, even the color of their hair. Hannibal wonders if that's part of the reason why Will feels such kinship with her, such protectiveness: a subconscious attachment that causes him to see himself in her place.

But perhaps Hannibal can be thankful for that attachment, since in the name of fretting over her, Will turns to him and slowly meets his eyes at long last. There are only the slightest slivers of blue reflected back at him, but at the very least, Will's trembling seems to have died down significantly. Now that he's found purpose, his body is no longer vibrating with excess energy. "Can you give her something for the pain?"

Hannibal glances at Margot, her drawn face. A broken bone is a simple but persistent pain. He would normally advise over-the-counter medications for such a straightforward recovery process, but he can't deny that he wants to accommodate Will in any way he can. He presses his lips together and exhales gently through his nose. "Narcotic use for an injury like this would be frowned upon when acetaminophen would suffice. Ibuprofen can extend the healing process since it suppresses the necessary inflammation." Will's eyes flash, but before he can argue, Hannibal softly says, "Off the record, I can give her a two-day supply of Vicodin. Though there should be absolutely no alcohol use, since there's an inherent risk respiratory depression."

"Ten-four, good doctor," Margot replies, eyes half-lidded with a haze of discomfort and exhaustion. She does look worse for wear; Will takes care of rounding up the scarf, the splint, and cold compresses they'd used in her makeshift sling. He puts Margot's hat back on her, winds the thicker winter scarf around the bandages that conceal her throat. He does so gently, carefully. It's comforting, in a way, to know he is still capable of such when his mind's in this state.

"I have a reusable bag in my office," Hannibal says with an incline of his head. "And I can get you what you need so you can be on your way. I know you must be tired."

Will's eyes fix on him. Lock. But he doesn't *look* tired—in fact, he seems incredibly awake. Still, he nods sharply. "Yeah, I should get her back."

Hannibal holds open the examination room door. "I assume to your house." Something flashes in Will's face as he nudges Margot past Hannibal, then follows her himself. Hannibal's attention on Will is intent as he places himself at his side, takes the lead.

"Well, she's not going back to the Vergers tonight, if that's what you mean," Will snaps back, almost disbelieving, almost accusatory. Like he believes Hannibal would suggest sending his friend back into an unsafe environment, rather than knowing Will well enough to know he'd never allow such a thing.

He's off tonight, aggressive—his feminine side is swept away, and though after the gala Hannibal had believed that monster living inside Will was decidedly female, tonight he seems standoffishly male. Does he expect it to be a problem, rather than something they've already settled and put behind them, Hannibal wonders? Will is tense, terse, and Hannibal could excuse a bad mood as an emotional upset, but Will's not responding to anything the same way he usually would. He doesn't seek out Hannibal's touch, or seem interested in it whatsoever. And yet it's clear Will knows him, knows what they are to one another; it's no shift in personality, just a shift in mindset.

"Will," Hannibal replies evenly, "you could tell me yourself that you were sending her back tonight, and I wouldn't believe you. I would never assume you'd put your loved ones in danger."

Will pauses halfway through a step, a split-second buffer that softens his face before it is smoothed over again. But he lowers his voice, gentles his tone, despite the hard edge to his voice when he says, "I know that."

Hannibal's lips turn faintly downward. This attitude is far from encouraging. His hostility is as strange as it is undesirable, but why? *Why?*

The consideration that Will might be having regrets about their night together is utterly unwelcome—regardless, it makes a home in Hannibal's mind. Makes him quiet.

He's swift with things in the office, gives Will no reason to find fault. He portions out four little white pills into a blank vial from his med kit; offers Margot his own personal bottle of water for her to take a swig and wash it down with. That, at least, eases some of the tension from around Will's eyes, and some of the cold from around Hannibal's heart.

If Will is retreating from him because of the intimacy they've shared, then it is Hannibal's sole desire to work through it. Whatever transgression or violation of trust, he's certain he can ease it if only Will would talk to him. "Will, before you go—may I have a word?"

Will, leaning back against the office wall, is still. He looks at Margot, and back to Hannibal; but Margot, for her part, does seem to know how to read a room.

"I'll wait outside," she says. Offers a smile. "Thanks, Doc."

"My pleasure," Hannibal answers. "Though I wish it hadn't been necessary."

"Yeah. Me too." Margot slips from the office. The door clicks closed behind her, and Will fidgets, bursts into anxious pacing across the narrow space. "She just took pain meds, Hannibal. I shouldn't leave her alone—"

"Will." He freezes. His shoulders are tense again. His hands shake. He doesn't look up or meet Hannibal's eyes, doesn't move closer. It's a clear tell. "If I've done something to upset you—"

Will rounds on him, eyes black, teeth bared. He locks eyes with Hannibal like it's the very dare he's found himself faced with by Mason Verger.

Hannibal's instincts rear up, front and center. In Will's eyes, they see a challenge. A threat. He holds very still, determined to wait this out. Whatever it is, he can endure Will's fury. Match it. Outwit it, if need be. But he first must know the underlying source.

Will stares at him. Stares, and stares, and stares. Until he is forced to slowly blink. Until he lowers his gaze, Until, one last time, the rigid lines of his body relax, trembling from the lingering strain. His voice is just above a whisper, a hushed and wretched admission. "I want to kill him, Hannibal. Really. Honestly, I…"

Oh.

Hannibal exhales in a rush. The concern stays with him, but the coldness washes away; it's replaced by flame pouring forth from the beast inside his bones. It's fire, it's heat, it's relief. Murder is one thing he is uniquely qualified to cope with.

He takes one step forward, another, closes the distance between them. Cradles Will's face in his hands—his precious, dangerous thing, and treasures the faint scrape of stubble against his palms.

Will is beautiful like this. Will is always beautiful to him. His eyes are huge and dark, the blue moons of his eyes eclipsed by Hannibal's omnipresent shadow. His nose, his cheeks, his lips flushed with blood and winter chill. Even now, he is cold to the touch—and it takes a moment. Perhaps a few moments longer than it normally would. But something in Will snaps, and he presses into Hannibal's touch, almost electric, almost defiant.

Hannibal leans down to meet him; there's a flash of something in his eyes that smooths out into even, assessing challenge as their foreheads touch.

Hannibal wants to give him everything.

"Dear Will," he murmurs. "I told you once that violence in the name of defending one's kin is not violence at all. It's instinct, beloved. And you must allow yourself to become intimate with your instincts."

Hannibal stares deep enough into Will's eyes that he imagines he can see that thing inside him gazing back. And then it blinks and comes alive and opens its mouth in a growling drawl. "What if it's not for her?" Will asks. "What if I want it for me?"

His response is a dangerous question to pose, but it's also one that Hannibal is deeply invested in the answer to. In the dark and tense space between them, he murmurs, "Do you think the two are different?"

Will's lips part in something that's nearly a snarl. His eyes flicker down to Hannibal's. "…yes."

Hannibal savors this static-charged intimacy, the feeling of Will's shallow, panting breaths against his mouth. "I agree." Will twitches, almost like he wants to pull away. Instinctively, it makes Hannibal tighten his grip, and Will's pupils fatten. Whether that cue is fight or flight or something else altogether, Hannibal cannot be sure.

But he desperately wants to know.

"All things in good time," Hannibal says quietly. "Mason Verger will get his due someday. For tonight, you must attend to Margot. She's relying on you to take her home. And I am reliant on your return."

Will's eyes burn. He opens his mouth and closes it again. His eyes drop; his upper lip curls in something that might be a sneer, but looks so shaken and conflicted and *furious* that it can't be fully categorized at all.

So Hannibal placates him, because he must—and with the truth, because it's the simplest. "Even the passing thought of you being taken from me is a terrible thing to endure. Would you risk the loss of everything for a thoughtless impulse, Will? Or will you think about it some more before you act rashly?"

To anyone listening in, it would sound like temperance, a plea for a stay of violence. In reality, it's a simple caution. *Don't rush into this. If it's what you truly want, you must plan accordingly.*

And perhaps someday, Will might hear Hannibal's true words. But tonight, after a long, tense moment, the strain melts from his shoulders. It clearly takes effort, but it's an effort rewarded. "Okay. Yeah… okay. Alright."

Hannibal surveys him. At long last, when Will's eyes meet his in drained but wary acceptance; hesitant of his own lack of restraint, Hannibal reassures him by brushing his lips at the corner of Will's mouth. A silent *I see you* and *I accept you* and *I am not afraid of you*. Will's lashes flutter gently at the touch of them—the first thing Hannibal has seen that is a signal of his Will returning to him from that place inside his mind.

It takes one long, drawn-out moment for Will to respond, to lift his chin into Hannibal's touch. Will's mouth against his settles something inside him that he didn't even realize was unsettled until now, eases a knot of tension until it unravels. His palms relax, his thumbs stroke over Will's cheeks, and he hums a quiet moan when Will's teeth graze his lower lip in a gentle but stinging nibble.

"That's it, darling," he murmurs into Will's mouth. "There you are."

Will's lips are damp and pink when their kiss breaks; his eyes slowly returning to blue as his pupils contract, still too overcome by the events of the evening to allow himself to be swept away to arousal. Hannibal tilts his head in consideration, brushes Will's growing stubble with his knuckles and offers a fleeting but genuine smile.

Will breaks eye contact. Huffs quietly, back to his defiant self. "What?"

"I enjoy every facet of you, but I like seeing you unfiltered from time to time." Hannibal's hands fall to Will's shoulders, squeeze softly before they fall away. "You should get home. It's late."

"Yeah." Will's brow creases in a complicated frown. He gives Hannibal a long, searching look. Opens his mouth, and then closes it again. Hannibal watches the process with some interest, and though Will does not look entirely settled, and still carries a simmering undercurrent of anger in his limbs, he seems tempered now. Controlled. "Thank you. For taking care of Margot. For your help."

Hannibal blinks slowly; resists the urge to reach out again, to pull Will near and press the truth of his devotion into his flesh with tongue and teeth. "Will, you may always call upon me. Always, for anything, at any time of day."

That same long look—perhaps assessing his honesty after their tumultuous evening, Will parsing his truthfulness in the face of his more violent nature. But whatever it is he sees, Hannibal is entirely sincere. When it comes to Will's needs, he could never be anything but.

Will nods. Turns. Heads for the door, and then—"I have a crazy few days coming up; reviews for finals and stuff before Thanksgiving break this week, so I might be a little spread thin."

Hannibal's lips press together in resigned displeasure. "That's quite alright. Your studies have to come first." No doubt, he'll hear from Will sooner than that; inevitable contact once he hears of this latest display. Especially if he should see the clues that Hannibal has so carefully left for him. "And for the holiday?"

Will frowns at first—and then looks taken aback, the first real and open expression Hannibal has seen from him all night. "Thanksgiving? I don't—I dunno, I mean." He hesitates, rubs the back of his neck, and pulls his gaze away. "I guess I didn't think about it. I haven't celebrated since…"

Since his father passed, probably. No family left, no mother to speak of. It's a day Hannibal often spends alone; volunteers for extra shifts so his colleagues might spend time with their children and grown siblings, parents and distant cousins. Will is the first notable exception he's had to that rule since he moved to America and learned of the custom. Well over a decade, surely.

Hannibal considers him, his bashful hesitance. It is, at least, worth the offer. "I'd be glad to have you with me, mylimasis."

There's a slight pull between Will's brows, a complex little look that seems almost puzzled, uncomprehending. But then—"Okay," Will says softly. "Sure. That'd be… good."

Hannibal smiles. Just a little. Something small, affectionate. Even with this love realized between them, it seems they're still getting to know one another. In a few days when the dust has settled, they will have a quiet, uninterrupted evening that is only for them. He's somewhat taken aback by how much the idea pleases him. Perhaps he should stop being surprised by how everything about Will's presence in his life is pleasing.

"It's settled, then," Hannibal says. "I'll see you Thursday, if not before."

Will nods, the wrinkle on his forehead still somewhat distant, somewhat lost. "Okay." He half-turns, and hesitates in the doorway. But when he speaks again, he sounds truly reluctant to go. "Goodnight, Hannibal."

"Goodnight, Will."

He goes. A muffled murmuring in the hall is the only sound as he collects Margot and shepherds her out, heads for home. His footsteps fade from range, even for Hannibal's sensitive ears, and he tells himself that it is necessary to allow Will his space, his home, his life. That the choice to spend time together means infinitely more when Will has his own place to retreat to.

The monster in his mind paces restlessly at the retreat of its mate. Awaits his return, his judgement of the offering Hannibal has left with restless fervor.

Desires strongly to leave him another.

It will take time. There are far more accessible victims than Mason Verger that he has had in mind for weeks or months, scenes planned in the grand foyer of his mind palace that would translate beautifully from manufactured memory to real life.

But the thought is persistent.

If he is to kill Mason Verger for Will, he'll have to think about presentation. About logistics. It would be risky. But if he cannot convince Will to share in Mason's death with him, then presenting him as an oblation to the altar of Will's name is the next best thing.

Margot falls asleep on the barren mattress of Will's pull-out couch bed. Will covers her with blankets as he sets about cleaning up the living room.

He has no idea what's real. Everything is uncertain to him now.

He's still angry. There's no mistaking that sensation, that terrible, pressing furor that builds inside him. The more he thinks about it, the worse it gets.

But.

Upon reflection, it's hard for Will to believe that Hannibal holds no regard for him at all. His mind has made a traitor of itself, true, and maybe his heart really is a fool. But whatever else, it's clear Hannibal doesn't want Will to ruin his own life. He's not looking for a mindless killer to unleash, or he would have pointed Will at Mason Verger tonight and pulled the metaphorical trigger—

(Will might have even let him.)

—but he didn't.

The pieces of this unknowable puzzle are starting to coalesce behind his eyes. They manifest themselves in several simple truths.

One: Hannibal has been waiting for this. He wanted Will to find out. He *doesn't* want Will to run off on his own to wreak havoc and destruction. He wants an equal. A partner. And, as the opportunity presented itself, a lover.

Two: Will was right. The Chesapeake Ripper *is* lonely. For whatever reason, he has attached himself to Will. Perhaps for lack of a better option. *Or* , as Wilhelmina stubbornly whispers in the back of his mind, *perhaps because there* ***is*** *no one better.* Hannibal had said it himself, hadn't he? That they are all suited to one another: Hannibal, Will, and the Ripper. If only Will had known back then what he knows now. If only he had known what Hannibal was really saying, but—

Three: Regardless, Will loves him.

It may be the worst revelation of all, or maybe the best. He doesn't reject the murder, the death, the destruction. No—he loved the Ripper, was willing to know him and accept him before he knew what Hannibal had done.

What Will hates are the *lies.*

But what else can he do?

He can't turn Hannibal in; couldn't, even if he wanted to. Will has no evidence, no proof, and there's not a jury in the world that would believe a kind-hearted and generous doctor would be capable of the grotesquely beautiful atrocities the Chesapeake Ripper has made. It would be his word against Hannibal's, and Will knows he would lose that fight.

He could run.

The thought makes his stomach squeeze with pain, brings breath short to his lungs. Will clutches a cushion close to his chest and breathes through the terrible thought of it. But it's reality—if he wants to escape, his only real option is to run. Pack a bag and board a flight tonight, before Hannibal ever knows Will has seen his latest display. Before he knows that Will knows. Never write another article. Just tuck Margot in, feed Winston. Leave a note and go. Almost polite.

Hannibal might come after him. He might not. But even if he tried, Will could give him a hell of a runaround, and if Hannibal wanted to maintain appearances in Baltimore, he'd be forced to give up at *some* point.

Or Will could stay.

Because the simple truth of the matter is this: if he goes, he loses everything. Not just Hannibal, but his home. His father's keepsakes. Winston. Margot. His chance at finally getting his degree. There won't be time to arrange anything, to save any of it, and doing so would certainly leave a trail.

Will looks toward the bed where Margot sleeps, dark circles sunken in under her eyes. Her cast is a flash of red among a sea of green and blue blankets, old flannel and wool. His departure would leave her unprotected and utterly alone.

If he cuts Hannibal out, he loses everything else.

And maybe that's what he wanted.

Will sinks into the chair, puts his elbows on his knees, and his face against the pillow in his arms. If he goes, Will knows with terrible, crushing certainty that he will never love anyone the way he loves Hannibal—not *anyone* . Never again.

And, if any of this has been true, he will never *be* loved like this again.

He risks his life if he stays. But he'll have no life at all if he goes. He will never know how much of Hannibal's sentiment is genuine, he will never know how far back this plot stretches. Was any of it real at all? Or has all of it been?

Everything to lose, everything to gain. A devil's gamble, winner-take-all.

He doesn't know. He doesn't *know.*

But.

Will lifts his head. One thing's for certain: he cannot leave Mason Verger unchecked. His transgressions are unforgivable. His violence is abhorrent. The violations he's perpetrated, not only to others, but to *Margot—*

His indecision on the matter of Hannibal aside, he cannot be indecisive on this. Whether he stays or goes, there's no other option. If he has to run, he won't leave Margot unguarded. He can be willfully blind, or he can put a stop to it.

He has to kill Mason.

It'll take planning. Undoubtedly, it will be the most difficult thing Will has ever done. The security on the Verger Estate is tight, and that's putting aside the sheer forensic concerns. It'll call on his background; everything he learned at Loyola before Beau moved them here to Wolf Trap. For indeed, three years of top marks in learning how to solve murders has put him in the position of being unusually prepared to commit one.

And maybe in the process, he'll figure out what the hell he's going to do about Hannibal.

He has to start somewhere.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter Notes

Hello darlings! Here we are, next update. Things are getting fun. I really do hope to reply to all of you soon, please don't be discouraged that I haven't! I've been working a hell of a lot of overtime, so believe me when I say that your comments have been keeping me going, and I treasure every one of them.

Edit: holy shit i just noticed we've crossed the 200k threshold. thank you SO much to everyone who is coming along for the ride, i seriously wouldn't be here without you. and here's to the future, the plans i have (that these dumbasses keep wrecking) and all the emotional turmoil i'll put you through, dear readers! ♥

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will wakes up to the scent of burned, cheap coffee, and Margot staring wistfully out the window with a chipped mug balanced between her cast and her good hand. She's in one of Will's faded New Orleans hoodies and her underwear, bare legs folded up, feet flat against the mattress. Her hair is frizzy around her face, revealing the natural curls that she often flat-irons away. Her eyeliner is smudged, never wiped off from last night.

She doesn't look at Will when his eyes open. She doesn't have to. "I was serious," she says softly.

Will blinks blearily. He doesn't yet lift his head from the pillow, but Margot continues regardless.

"When I said I'd trade Mason for you in a heartbeat. You're my best friend. Maybe the only real friend I've ever had."

Will gazes at her, contemplative. "You have Alana."

Margot scoffs gently. "I met her three days ago." She flushes. "And I met her because of you."

Will says nothing. It's true, after all.

He sits up; Margot shuffles over to make room for him, and they sit hip-to-hip, leaning up against the back of the couch. She passes him her mug, and Will takes a sip. Grimaces, and hands it back. She echoes his expression and shrugs.

It's silent for a while. Margot exhales through her nose, a soft stream of breath.

Will wonders if, when this thing is done, she'll hate him. Will wonders if she'll thank him. "You've gotta do something about him, Margot."

She leans her head back, glances through her lashes at Winston sleeping on the living room rug. “I know.” Closes her eyes for a moment. “I’m not the only person he’s hurt. There’s a lot of people who’d like him gone.” Her eyes crack open, slivers of bluish-bottle-green. She rolls her head on the cushion to face Will, a deeply fond and deeply despairing expression twisting her features. “You and your daddy are the only ones who ever gave a damn about me in that house.”

Will’s lips press together into a tight, grim line. “If they don’t treat you right, you shouldn’t be *in* that house.”

Margot smiles, shakes her head. Huffs a bitter laugh. “If I want my inheritance I gotta play by their rules and live under their roof.” Her smile crumbles into something terrible as she looks down into the mug, the coffee within. “Daddy’s talking about adding a clause to his will, that the fortune can only be inherited by a male heir. Trying to force me to settle down—God, I *know* Mason told him about Alana, I just know it. And he won’t throw me out. Not when he thinks he can *fix* my *perversion*.”

Will bares his teeth. “You don’t need fixing. I don’t need fixing. We’re not *broken*.”

Margot looks up at the ceiling, the old swirls laid into the plaster that are starting to fracture and flake. It’s something Will *should* look into fixing, and had meant to, before all of this started. Ever since he met Hannibal, ever since the Ripper started courting him, he hasn’t had the time. He thought those two things were coincidental. Now, well. He knows better.

Will purses his lips. Scratches at his face, the stubble growing in. It’s itchy. He doesn’t usually let it stay more than a day. Today, he’s not sure if he wants to see Wilhelmina staring back at him. He needs time to think. Time to himself. Even if he feels half-empty because of it.

Maybe they *are* broken, him and Margot. But maybe they’ve just been made to *think* they are. If there’s fixing to be done, one thing’s for certain—there’s no one *except* them who can do it. Transformation comes from the inside, a mental reform before it becomes physical. The restoration of their lives will only start once they build their own solid foundations, both free of the cracks Mason Verger has left in their composure.

Margot glances over at him; a long, even look. “I’m not blind, you know. I saw how you were last night.”

Will doesn’t meet her eyes. Instead, he looks at the cracks in the ceiling. “I found something out. I guess I’m trying to figure out how to deal with it.”

“About Hannibal?” Will’s attention snaps to her. Margot shrugs. “I’ve never seen you get pissed enough to wreck your house before. And since you did it before you found out about Mason, I figure it has to be about him. He’s the only other thing you care that much about.”

His head drops back. Will closes his eyes and tells himself he’s not hiding. “Yeah, that’s probably true.”

“Is it really bad?”

Will bites back the initial impulse to snap that he wouldn’t have wrecked his house if it wasn’t that bad. But…

Even a dripping faucet can overflow. If anyone learns of what Will knows, it’s one more source of potential disaster, someone who could make that decision on Will’s behalf, and that feels like betrayal. Like Hannibal’s truth is something that shouldn’t be in anyone else’s hands but Will’s.

Hannibal didn't *want* everyone to know. Just him.

"No," Will whispers. "I guess it's not."

"He didn't hurt you, did he?"

Did he? Yes. And no. "Probably not intentionally."

Margot stares at him expectantly. Will's mind goes terribly, awfully blank as he tries to find out what the hell he's going to tell her. What he can even *say.* And what she would believe.

And then it hits him.

"He's studying to be a psychiatrist. He had an interview with Chilton."

Her mouth slackens. Her eyes go soft with sympathy and dread. "Oh, shit. Honey."

The guilt chokes him. Not a lie, but not the truth. He tells himself it's better than lying to her outright. Wonders why he doesn't feel as bad about the fact that Hannibal is a serial killer than he does about lying to her about it. But in this case, stumbling over his words only makes her believe he's more wounded than he is. "I mean—it's a coincidence. It isn't indicative of a. A motive. For being with me."

Will curls in on himself. Hannibal's interest in psychology as a broad concept, no. His interest in Will's pathology, yes. Definitely.

Though one could argue that *Will* is with *Hannibal* because of his own fascination with the Ripper's pathology. If not for the body of Andrew Caldwell, Hannibal would have remained an attentive, attractive, magnetic stranger lingering in the hallways of his memory. With Abel Gideon serving as Will's contact on the inside, he never would have had cause or need to return to Johns Hopkins.

But he had captured Hannibal's attention. Will was doomed from the moment he opened his mouth.

But—that's not entirely true, is it? Wilhelmina has been howling inside him since childhood. Even she was not the problem, but a symptom of it. This brutal wildness has always been a part of him. Would he not have been determined to find Hannibal regardless? The Ripper only gave them direction, a path to walk, a trail to track. One way or another, fate would have brought him to Hannibal.

Maybe he's thinking about this all wrong.

Margot touches his shoulder, a brush of gentle fingers and coarse fiberglass. "Of course not," she soothes. "He loves you. Even last night, it was so obvious how worried he was about you." Will exhales, a soft puff of breath that tastes like chemicals more than coffee. Cheap, instant stuff. He glances up at her, and Margot catches his eyes. "Really. He looked like he was dying to give you a hug if he didn't think you would've hit him."

"I wouldn't have tried to hit him," Will mutters. Falls silent. Thinks about it. "Maybe I would have." And off her look, "Okay, I definitely would have. I was pissed."

That, at least, pulls a smile from her. "Don't take it out on him unless he deserves it."

Will scowls. "I'm not sure he doesn't yet."

“You said it wasn’t on purpose.”

No, wounding Will’s trust was not his express intention. But—“That doesn’t mean it didn’t hurt me.” Will’s eyes lower. He sinks down the couch until he’s flat on his back beside her, his frizzy, unkempt bun a tangled mess beneath him. His eyes are heavy-lidded, half-closed. His lips feel dry, cracked, as they soften into something gently melancholy. “It still hurts. Whether or not he meant it doesn’t stop the bleeding.”

Margot makes a noise of quiet sympathy. “That sounds terrible.”

And Will, helplessly, shrugs. There is nothing more or less to say than the simple truth of, “I love him.”

“Does that excuse it?”

Why does she now sound accusatory instead of defensive? Probably because she, too, loves Will, albeit in a different way. “No. But it makes it easier to—”

To what?

Forgive him, Wilhelmina whispers. *For his nature, and his transgressions, which are simply habit, not deliberate malice.*

Is there anything simple about this? Will asks himself. Unsurprisingly, she does not deign him with a reply. But the answer is a resounding *no,* with or without her input.

“Will, the second you start rationalizing bad behavior is the second you’re sunk.” He can feel the weight of her eyes, even as his slip closed.

“I’m confused. Are you defending him or not?” Will snaps. Immediately regrets the choice so that his jaw snaps shut, but not enough to take it back. Margot looks stricken, but Will won’t apologize. Instead, he allows his eyes to close entirely, to shut her out—to separate himself from her, from Hannibal, from *this.*

But behind his eyes, Wilhelmina waits. Will’s not sure that’s any better.

“I just,” Will says before Margot can explain herself, “I know I can’t make excuses. I’m not *rationalizing* it, that’s why I’m angry. I know he was wrong not to tell me, as much as I know that he never—” Will’s voice breaks. “—he never meant to hurt me.”

Will lifts an arm up over his face, and folds his elbow over his eyes. He remembers lying like this in Hannibal’s bed just a few nights ago, feeling such exhaustion and adoration and soul-rending *fear* that Hannibal would be taken from him. It’s no wonder now why Hannibal was never concerned about the same. It wasn’t a decision made out of desire to deceive him, but rather one made with the sole intention to—

“He just wanted to protect me.”

The Ripper is a curiously cruel creature, but whatever scheme he’s enacted with Will has backfired. Maybe he never intended it to be what it has become. But maybe he did.

But he wants Will, and Will wants him. The anger still boils, but the song remains the same.

For better or for worse, wherever this goes, Hannibal is *his.* Should the Ripper rise to the heights of infamy, of refinement and debauchery and bring Will alongside him, then let them rule it all uncontested. And if, in the end, he sabotages Will, then Will shall settle for nothing less for his destruction. Quid pro quo.

Wilhelmina rumbles inside the cage of his ribs with a pleased and satisfied purr, and a lilting whisper:

That doesn't mean we can't play with him for playing with us.

Will's arm drops away from his eyes. What he sees is the same house, the same room, the same ceiling, the same best friend sitting beside him and worriedly staring at him.

However.

"But what he did was born of good intentions. I can't say the same of Mason. We both know it. He's escalating." Will pauses. Rolls the words around his mouth, tastes the truth of them. The bitterness that makes his teeth sting and smart. "He'll kill you."

Margot purses her lips. She looks down into the mug, then with a sigh, she sets it on the side table. "I can't leave."

Will blinks slowly. Turns his head, and stares up at her, and feels like something else. "You shouldn't have to."

She looks at him. Will steadily looks back.

Margot works her bruised jaw, opens it and closes it again. Touches her throat, which must still be sore. Her voice carries a raspy quality that it doesn't usually; he knows it must be the swelling. She's lucky she didn't die last night.

Mason did this because of Will. It's only right that Will returns the favor because of Margot.

"I won't let this stand," Will murmurs. He pushes himself up, pushes the wisps of his bangs out of his eyes with impatience. Scratches over his stubble like he can feel something else underneath. "I won't let him get away with it. I don't know how, or when, or what I'll do. But I want you to know that I can't let him do this, and if you want me to change my mind, you should tell me right now."

She won't change his mind, regardless. But at least he'll know better than to hope for her forgiveness when it's done.

Will turns. Sits cross-legged opposite her, and reaches for her hands. Holds them in his own between them. Her fingertips are cold. So are his.

"Do you think we're cursed?" Margot asks.

Will doesn't have to guess to follow her train of thought. He knows why she's asked. And in his heart, he's sure of the answer. "Only if we don't do anything about it."

Hannibal is hanging the garment bag up in his closet when he hears his tablet ping. He takes a breath. Steadies himself.

Returns to it, where it rests on his mattress. He has taken to carrying it from room to room, awaiting a notification that never came, until now.

He brings it downstairs. Denying himself is torture, but the anticipation is sweet. He pours himself a glass of wine, retreats to his study. Turns on the fireplace. Settles into his chair.

He imagines Will watching him over the back of the couch, clean-shaven, sharp-eyed. His spectral fingertips drag over the edge of the desk. His eyes flicker past Hannibal to his built-in bookcases, and linger on the place where Chilton's notes are tucked away between the pages of the original Antonio Zatta illuminated manuscripts of *La Divina Commedia,* a rare version of the text that dates back to the 18th Century. Like Will, it is invaluable.

Hannibal is stalling.

The Will within his mind rests his cheek on the cushion. "Why are you hesitating?"

"I find anticipating something too keenly often leads to disappointment." The words are clipped as Hannibal speaks them aloud and acknowledges their truth.

Will smiles. Touches a pile of books on the corner of the table—academic psychological texts that Hannibal truly should be studying. Many of his habits are falling to the weyside in Will's wake. "Did I disappoint you?" he asks. His eyes crinkle with lines at the corners as he looks toward the fireplace and back. "Here?"

It pulls a breath from him. A sigh, and the memory of that night not so long ago leaps forth unbidden. "Of course not," Hannibal murmurs. "You always exceed my expectations."

The imaginary Will reaches across the desk. Touches the back of his hand, and the phantom sensation raises gooseflesh on Hannibal's arms, concealed beneath the sleeves of his shirt from Will's attentive gaze. "Then have faith in me now."

Hannibal holds his eyes. Then, finally, lets his own fall to the darkened tablet screen.

Takes a breath, and unlocks it.

Reads.

> *I heard about what you did. Saw the pictures. But I feel like the pictures can't do it justice, and I wish I could have been there to see it myself. I'm sorry I didn't. I'm sure you meant me to, somehow, but last night was a disaster of a different kind, not one so elegant. The forensics team doesn't care about the details. I mean, of course they do—but not the same ones I care about.*
>
> *What color was the sky when they got there? What did it sound like, to be placed beside that pool and to feel the thrum of life in harmony with death?*
>
> *You surrounded him with hand-cut trimmings, each to send a message. But for each solemn statement, I can only find incredulity inside myself. What do you have to admire in me? My sight? I can only call it common sense, one that it baffles me others do not share. What do I have to offer you, as you have offered yourself to me?*

More than this, I hope.

I want to be candid. I can't say everything to you that I would want to say. But it feels wrong to let anyone else see the source of the matter. I hope you understand.

He stares at the words until they blur.

That can't be it. His clever Will, so elegantly verbose—and this, of all his analyses, is the one that suffers shame? The one he curbs his tongue upon? He tantalizes with poetry, dangles his understanding on a string, only to deny Hannibal his insight?

He looks up, nearly accusing; he snarls when he finds the imaginary version of Will has gone. Of course he has. He is never anything but terribly *frustrating.*

If he had figured it out, he would not have bothered to write anything at all. He surely would have shown up on Hannibal's doorstep demanding answers, impatient creature that he is. Instead he had written *this,* which to Hannibal is nothing more than a tease of the symbolism he had left behind, messages solely for Will. Messages he so blatantly ignored and refused to acknowledge.

"Common *sense,"* Hannibal growls disdainfully, and sets the tablet down hard. He tells himself he is not disappointed. *Common sense.* As though anyone else could come close—

Common sense.

He pauses. Unlocks the tablet again, and draws it closer. Hannibal rereads the last few lines. Frowns.

It feels wrong to let anyone else see the source of the matter.

The wording is strange. It stumbles where Will's internal voice usually flows. It's not quite the right turn of phrase, not quite the right meaning. *Heart of the matter,* it should say. But instead it says *source.*

Why does it say source? Common sense would indicate it means something.

I hope you understand.

It's a message.

Hannibal exhales hard. Against his judgement, against his control, his heart has started to race. He opens the browser menu, those little options most casual web users ignore—everyone but Will, who built this website from the ground. Will, who maintains it. Will, who codes it.

View Page Source

The page disappears and is replaced by a solid wall of code, both HTML and CSS. Hannibal will admit that most of it is beyond his comprehension; he knows the bare blocks, but not the fine details. All he knows is that he is looking for something that does not belong. He scrolls down to the article text, interspersed with style tags, and— *there.*

Hidden inside a comment tag, rendering the content within invisible but to those viewing the source code, is a link. He copies and pastes it into the search bar.

Password:

The cursor blinks inside the text box. The screen is the same gray of Will's webpage, though lacking any of the header images or navigational toolbars. It blinks and blinks and blinks and Hannibal stares at it. A password. Of course. Because Will would not be so simple as for a hidden link to be enough; inevitably whatever is inside that link is behind yet another wall, another fort.

For a moment, the irritation is immense. Too, there is admiration at Will's tenacity, his clever nature. Hannibal would not have noticed him otherwise, would never have kept him. Will is simply doing all he can to protect himself.

But whatever text is inside is not *just* for himself. It's also for the Ripper.

He's trying to protect them *both.*

Will meant for the Ripper to find this. It's a code made to be cracked. It is something Hannibal will know, something they have shared.

He opens Will's article again in another tab and reads it several times more. Leans back into his office chair and frowns at the screen. Again, he finds himself lingering on that last paragraph.

If *source* is a clue, perhaps there is another hint within *heart* 's absence.

But when he enters it, *heart* denies him. So, too, does *love* and *beloved.* Hannibal huffs an impatient sigh, but is not surprised. They all seem too simplistic. Yet, he doesn't feel like he's on the wrong track. It's clear that Will does nothing by accident.

Why remove the word *heart?*

He lifts his eyes away from the tablet. The backlight of the screen makes him blink blearily as his pupils adjust to the dimness of the room. He frowns idly. Taps his fingers on the top of the desk. The Will from his memory does not return to rejoin him, and Hannibal tells himself that he doesn't notice the emptiness within his study.

The fireplace *whooshes* softly. He remembers Will kneeling before it, skirt flowing around his legs, resting his head back against Hannibal's thigh with a tumbler of whiskey held in hand. Curls loose, rolling forward over his shoulder. Throat exposed to Hannibal's starving eyes and curious fingers, still cold from the drive home. The way Will had smiled when Hannibal touched him. The way he'd sighed.

Why remove the word *heart?*

He thinks back further. To another night, weeks before. To Will broken, shaken, hopeful, yearning. Only just learning to trust him, tucked close against his side. Murmuring devotion, promising loyalty. Family. Wrapped in the armor of Hannibal's robe, unknowingly partaking in the sacrament Hannibal had prepared for him—

Hannibal inhales sharply.

Not the *word* heart.

The Ripper had removed the heart *itself.*

Password: The Hanged Man

The page opens. And Hannibal absorbs the words inside as though they are the only thing that can soothe him, can sustain him. As his wine sits, forgotten, the idea doesn't even feel like a lie.

Some of the words are the same, but there's more. There's so much more.

I heard about what you did. Saw the pictures. But I feel like the pictures can't do it justice, and I wish I could have been there to see it myself. I'm sorry I didn't. I'm sure you meant me to, somehow, but last night was a disaster of a different kind, not one so elegant. The forensics team doesn't care about the details. I mean, of course they do—but not the same ones I care about.

What color was the sky when they got there? What did it sound like, to be placed beside that pool and to feel the thrum of life in harmony with death?

You surrounded him with hand-cut trimmings, each to send a message. But for each solemn statement, I can only find incredulity inside myself. What do you have to admire in me? My sight? I can only call it common sense, one that it baffles me others do not share. What do I have to offer you, as you have offered yourself to me?

What you see in me is an idealized version of my own self, but I can't call it real. I saw more of myself in the paper heart. It would be so easy for you to crush me. I saw more of myself in the antiquated bars that took the place of ribs, an ancient set of social expectations polished to gleaming. You've left my door wide open, and now I know it. You've left me trapped in twilight, surrounded by a well-maintained life that likes to pretend to give freedom to grow. But what does a greenhouse sapling know of the wilderness? It will only truly know the wild when the caretakers are gone.

I can't help feeling like I'm in a downward spiral. Centrifugal force is stealing my breath, my consciousness. I'm being spun so fast I feel like I could pass out and not be aware of it. But I am aware. On one side of this vortex is my life. On the other side is you.

In my mind, you take the shape of a monster because I don't know the man. You haunt me. I should be terrified of you when I dream, but I'm not. I see and feel your hands on me, but no matter how gently you touch me, I bleed. It's so good I can't describe it. It's something no one else can give me but you, no matter how much I wish they could.

I've tried. I've tried so hard to cut you out from inside me, but I can't. I want you there.

I should ask you to stop this. If I was a better person, I would. But I won't ask that of you, because I don't want you to. And I know you don't want a better person, you want ***me.***

You promise prosperity. You promise unity, and bounty, and delight. You promise to free me, but you can't pull me out of this cage any more than I could put you in one. If I'm going to evolve, you have to wait for me to emerge on my own. I know you see me. I know you see ***him,*** *and I know you must hate it. But leaving him will be the greatest sacrifice I ever make in your name. You cannot hurt him, or I will never accept you. Do you understand? I will* ***never*** *forgive you if you do.*

Please be patient—I am not yet the eagle you see inside me. I'm still only a chick trapped within my shell, and I am exhausted from trying to break free. I am naked and afraid and blind and reliant on another's warmth. Let me leave the nest, but leave it whole and unbroken. Please allow me to hatch before you ask me to fly.

But never doubt that I dream every night of doing so at your side.

*And while you wait, if you **will** wait, please be careful. Because with every message you send to me, they collect more pieces of you. You've made them furious, and they will never stop looking for us. If we're together before we're ready, we'll only make it that much easier for them to pull us apart.*

*You know where I live. You know who I am. I can't say the same, and that puts us on unlevel ground. You've always had the strategic advantage. You've always had power over me. I know that's just the way of things. But if you tell me who you are, I will never know I was capable enough to **deserve** to find you. I think you know that, too. That's why you haven't come to me yet.*

So I won't ask you to stop, but I'll ask you to wait.

Let me have my hunt, like you've had so many of yours. I promise you, if you're willing to wait on me, I'll find you. When I do, I'll be ready. I'll be worthy.

I wish we didn't have to talk this way. I wish I could see you.

But I will. Soon.

Yours,

♥

P.S. I wrote all of this and had to stop myself before I posted it for everyone to see. They don't deserve to see it. They don't deserve to see you like I do. When I started this blog, it was because I was hoping you would find me, and now you have. I hope you aren't angry that I want to keep you to myself.

Hannibal sets the tablet down, infinitely gentle. The words strike him in a way he has never felt stricken, straight to the chest, so full he could burst. He aches.

He has known possessiveness. He has known affection. He has known desire and peace and starvation and satiation at Will's hands. He has known fulfillment. But whatever this feeling, it is new. It is *strong.*

He would kill to protect it without hesitation.

Will.

Hannibal rests his elbows atop the desk, hands curled together. He rests his mouth against them, not quite the same pressure and sensation as a kiss. He has never wanted to confess all so much as he does in this moment. But he knows without a doubt that Will is right.

He must wait. He must resist. He must allow himself to be found. And when the time comes, when the fallout is over, he'll see Will rewarded for the rest of his life for his love, his loyalty—to the Ripper and Hannibal both.

“It’s called devotion,” that sweet voice murmurs to him, and when Hannibal looks up, Will is there opposite him. His lashes are half-lowered, lips curled in a private smile. But when he meets Hannibal’s gaze, his eyes are piercing. “What you’re feeling.”

Hannibal exhales slowly. Speaks to the shadow of Will that occupies the forefront of his mind, his own subconscious. Speaks the words aloud. “Have I not been devoted?”

“You’ve been strategically allegiant,” the not-Will replies. Blinks slowly, catlike. “You’ve enjoyed my company. You’ve been constant, and you’ve been present. You’ve been happy to share space, and found contentment in my touch. You’ve appreciated all that I am with your mind and your heart. But devotion is involuntary.”

Hannibal’s eyes slip to his glass of wine, still untouched. He lifts it. Sips from it. The white he chose for tonight is sweet and crisp across his tongue.

He closes the cover of the tablet. “Everything I have felt for Will is involuntary.” He refuses to acknowledge this confluence of his memory as the true Will. It doesn’t deserve the privilege. Nothing his mind dreams up could ever compare. “From the moment I met him.”

“You knowingly fostered codependency.” The shade watches him with baleful blue eyes. “You manipulated me, Hannibal.”

Hannibal sets the glass down, *hard.* Inhales slowly, and exhales to the count of eight, focusing on peace. He cannot let his own mind get the better of himself.

“When I find out, it’ll break my heart.”

Hannibal’s eyes snap up to him. The false Will paces before the fire, prowling like a creature—like he had the night before, steeped in the rage he felt for Mason Verger. He stops, an indistinct outline, translucent with gold. He trembles like Will trembled. That wounded look is returned to him in full force, and it leaves Hannibal with a different ache. A deeper ache.

“I’ll leave you.”

He’s on his feet in an instant, hands slammed down upon the desk. The false Will stumbles back, eyes huge and round and pierced through with fear and rage. His back hits the mantle, but he makes no sound. Ghosts have no weight, even if their words do.

No. *No.* Hannibal cannot allow it. He cannot tolerate it. To live without Will—“He would never.”

The shade tips his head back, exposes his throat. He shakes with terror, pale in a way Hannibal has only seen him—

—following the crime scene of The Hanged Man.

And who is to say that Will would not react the same once he knows the truth of the man who was behind it? Hannibal likes to think they’ve come so far, and yet he knows, he *knows,* that despite Will’s monstrous rage, there linger softer parts of him hidden beneath that vicious shell.

“Why wouldn’t I?” False-Will whispers. “All I had to do was *mention* leaving, and look at what you would do.”

He gasps, and there are bruises on his throat, not so unlike the ones Margot wore last night. Blue eyes are bloodshot, shiny with tears. That sweet voice shakes as Will himself is made the victim of such

violence, and it is *incensing*. The monster inside Hannibal snarls at the threat to his mate, but also at the threat his mate poses to him—grievous emotional harm that would never be undone, should he sever the bond between them.

"There is no *inch* of our history that hasn't been corrupted by your violence, Hannibal," he says. It is followed by a wounded sound from his ruined throat: a quiet, tremulous whine. "Every tender moment has been touched by fear. There's nothing of you that's ever been gentle for the sake of gentleness. You think I love the Ripper because I *want* to be hurt?" A hard laugh. It sounds like a sob, and Hannibal digs his nails into the polished wood. "No. I love him because I don't know he's been the one hurting me. And I love you because I think that you're kind. If you take those things away, what reason do I have to stay?"

Because I want you to, he does not say. *I need you to.*

But as this creature is a facet of his mind, it hears him anyway, and it *laughs.* Cruelly, without hesitation. With malice. "Why the hell would I care about what *you* want?" Will murmurs. His chin lowers from its submissive baring. Instead, he is now the very monster Hannibal recognizes. The very one he adores. "You've done nothing but jerk me around since the night we met. You showed me affection when it suited you, when it was beneficial. If you loved me, you'd do it because you want me to be happy, not because you wanted something in return."

Hannibal stares at the creature that looks like Will. It speaks with a painful, careless disregard that he has never experienced with such keen precision from anyone but himself.

He breathes, because he must.

He's shaking. He's not sure when that started.

He despises this weakness, but he cannot despise Will. He can no more crush this terrible need than he can cut out his own heart and feed it to his beloved. "What can I do?"

And just like that, there is mercy.

The bruises fade from Will's throat like they've never been at all. His shoulders relax, his eyes soften, and when he crosses the room to Hannibal, it's with that same casual grace he exhibited so effortlessly when they danced together. The same rolling, crashing wave that broke ashore in his bed. He cups Hannibal's cheeks in his intangible hands; his lips are like ice against his cheek, this terrible ghost that would gladly see him dead.

But when he smiles, he looks like Hannibal's Will, and his heart both speeds and slows. He thinks he might let Will kill him, if that's what he wanted.

"Show me you love me," Will murmurs. "Beyond a shadow of a doubt. If you are devoted, devote yourself to me. Put me first." His lashes dip. "Adore me for the sake of adoring me. Let me see it. Let me *feel* it." Their mouths brush, and Hannibal shivers. "Atone for every hardship I've suffered at your hand, whether I knew it or not."

Hannibal stares at the ghost in his mind. It's not Will, and it never has been—but it was born from inside his thoughts. He cannot assume it's entirely wrong. "Oh, is that all?" he mutters.

False-Will stares back at him. "Why?" he replies. "Is it too much to ask?"

Hannibal closes his eyes. It's strange. When he's not looking at this terrible thing, he can't feel its touch at all, but his skin smarts from the absence. "No."

And when he opens his eyes, it is gone.

He turns in place. Finds himself alone. His hands clench at his sides, but it does not stop the frenetic beating of his heart and the way it throbs with residual pleasure and sudden pain.

Will.

He returns to his desk. Picks up the wine glass, half-empty. Finds he is no longer in the mood to drink it, and turns to take it to the kitchen, but—

Hannibal picks up the tablet and takes it with him. And as he settles into bed that evening, reads over the words again and again, he feels yet another sensation that he is utterly unfamiliar with.

He thinks it might be called *regret.*

He should be asleep.

He should be, but he's not.

It's quiet in the little house now that Margot has gone; he couldn't convince her to stay another night, lest her father send someone out to collect her. Instead, she had promised to check in when she got home, to keep in close contact for the next few days, and so Will had been forced to let her leave. It's left him agitated, restless.

But it's not entirely because of Margot.

Will startles when his phone chimes. Startles, then scrambles.

[New Login from Abnormal Analysis]

Will exhales slowly. It took both more and less time than he expected. He is trying to reconcile the idea of this all-knowing eldritch creature in his mind with the man that he knows and loves. He's not quite sure he's succeeded yet, but he's getting closer.

What he wrote was primarily truth. The feelings spilled out of him faster than he could contain. The addendum at the end, too, was the truth. It's easier to put his love to words than he might imagine. Easier to ignore the anger than he might hope.

But he *is* angry.

Yeah. He's still angry.

But now he's the one with the upper hand.

At Will's request, Hannibal will not approach him. He'll allow this farce of a hunt to drag on, if only to allow Will the opportunity to find out the truth on his own. *Why* Hannibal seems to think that

would make him less pissed, Will has no idea—but it's over and done. He already knows. What's past is past.

But *Hannibal* doesn't know that.

It's a rare opportunity. The only one of its kind, if Will had to imagine. If anyone has ever gotten the drop on the Chesapeake Ripper before, Hannibal would certainly not be where he is now, comfortable and successful and free.

How fortunate for him that the first one to gain such an advantage is Will.

He lifts his head. Blinks slowly. Lets himself out the front door and onto the porch, and despite the fact that his coat is slung over his arm instead of his shoulders, he does not shiver at the bite of the cold.

The stars above are bright, shining. Orion, above the horizon—and near it, Jupiter.

Will takes a breath and lets it out.

On the porch railing, the silver phone buzzes again.

>> what the hell was that "article"? you promised your insight, not three paragraphs of a cop-out.

Will raises his brows. It seems Jack has found the aborted article. And not, it seems, the message Will had left beneath it.

Perfect.

He shrugs on the coat, and frees his hair from where it is caught beneath the collar. Touches his cheek, the smooth skin of it against his fingertips now that the stubble is sheared away.

Wilhelmina rests behind his eyes. When they smile, huff, type out a reply, it's together.

<< you'll get my insight. i need to make him angry. he might make a mistake if i don't give him what he wants.

>> damn it. you should have talked to me about this first.

<< this was my investigation until you butted your head in. if you don't like the way i do things you don't have to stick around.

>> i'm going to pretend you didn't just say that. i'm not in the mood to drive out to wolf trap and arrest you at one in the morning.

<< goodnight, jack.

He turns around and goes inside, then plugs in the silver phone beside his bed for its nightly charge and sighs. Extracts his main phone from beneath his pillow, and sees one missed message: a quick text from Margot that simply says *home safe.*

Will huffs and opens his correspondence with Hannibal instead.

<< hey, i know i didn't get a chance to call, but i just wanted to say goodn—

His fingers stall, and Will stares down at the message, still waiting to be sent.

He deletes it.

Will crawls into bed with the thought of tomorrow heavy on his mind, and the next day, and the next. Thanksgiving follows, a day of feasting and family. The idea of both within the context of Hannibal's truth are enough to flip his stomach, but—

Will presses his mouth to the black screen of his phone, but his lips and his bed are no less cold. He tucks it beneath his pillow and rolls over. Wilhelmina stretches luxuriously inside him, utterly unconcerned at the solitude. When Will closes his eyes, she is waiting for him.

Behind her perfect lipstick is a mouthful of fangs. She kisses his cheek and pets his hair, as Will imagines a mother might. She is familiar to him. A comfort.

Slowly, he smiles, and so does she.

"Ready or not," Will murmurs.

And Wilhelmina, triumphant—

"Here we come."

Chapter End Notes

So sorry to do this again, but due to the need to finish my MHBB, overwork at my job, and American Thanksgiving, I have to take two weeks off from updating Headlines. I'll be back on 12/1. I love you all!! In the meantime, have the Making Headlines Playlist on Spotify to help tide you over. <3

rebloggable >/
retweetable>

3:3

Chapter Notes

Uhhh, first of all, I can explain myself.

This chapter needed a lot more than I previously anticipated, and that took me longer than I expected. On top of life and the holiday and Tumblrgeddon and my job, this is what I ended up with, and (realistically) how it may be for the next few weeks. At this point, my update schedule is shot. No one knows when my boss is coming back from maternity leave and she won't answer emails, so my work schedule is in shambles. Chapters will be irregular until I'm back to my normal work conditions (and RDC is over, let's be honest, this fic won't be done by then).

The best places to keep up with me if you want progress are still Tumblr @maydei (I don't plan on leaving until that site is well and truly dead) but also Pillowfort @maydei, and Twitter @maydaymaydei. Hey, at least I have a brand.

That said, here, have 20k. (Be aware, this chapter is NSFW.) Now with absolutely GORGEOUS commission by nephila.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next few days pass in a way that, if Will were asked to describe in a word, he would say were decidedly scrambled. Monday morning becomes Tuesday night becomes Monday evening, and somehow Tuesday seems to last so long that it feels like three days instead of one.

Finals review is its own special kind of hell, and in between texting Gideon through another frustrating round of arguments with Annalise (Will longs to snarl that he has enough of his *own* issues to deal with, thank you very much, but he needs Gideon to keep an ear to the ground regarding the Ripper's latest kill) and still being blindingly furious about Mason Verger, Will snaps when his cell blares on Tuesday night and startles him out of an unintentional nap, head and arms sprawled across his laptop keyboard. He fumbles for the phone. "What?!"

A distinct pause. *"I can call back, if this is a bad time."*

Will deflates. He sighs heavily through his nose, and butts his cheek up against his screen like he can convey a physical reassurance through the line. "Hi," he mumbles. Lets his aching eyes fall closed, and rubs them with the back of his hand. "Sorry, my phone was right under my ear. Surprised me."

"Were you asleep?" A note of faint concern, tinged with apology. *"It's early, I didn't realize. I didn't mean to wake you."*

"Not your fault. I shouldn't have been asleep anyway. I didn't mean to be." Will moans exhaustion, bitten off behind his teeth. Squints through his lashes and glances at the time. "Shit, it's seven already?"

“Do you have plans?”

Hannibal’s tone is carefully-constructed to be unconcerned. Will sees right through him; huffs a breath in something that can’t quite be called a laugh, though it’s amused regardless. “Yeah, I have a date with Blackboard. Exciting stuff.”

He can practically hear Hannibal’s frown. *“I assume that has more significance than I understand.”*

“And I fell asleep on the keyboard. Nice.” Will’s amusement fades when he sees a solid two pages that have been filled with the letter K. “I have a paper due at midnight.” Will slumps and rolls sideways off the couch, pads to a comfortable chair and drops into the seat. He leans sideways against the arm of it, and reflects on the absurdity of knowing he’s wasting the Chesapeake Ripper’s time with talk about his assignments. There’s a distinct sensation of surrealism. “And another one due tomorrow, and two quizzes. I think they plan to screw us. They have to. They’re testing the limits of our sleep deprivation to prep us for the field.”

Hannibal laughs, warm and full-bellied. Unbidden, it draws a smile from Will in response and fills the dark spaces between his ribs with light. *“I often thought the same thing in medical school, though I do believe it made me a better doctor.”*

“Well,” Will drawls, “as long as I become a better doctor in the end, I guess that’s all that matters.”

Another laugh—this one quieter, more intimate, sending shivers down Will’s spine. *“I think you would make an excellent doctor, if you desired to be one. But for my own selfish desire to see you, and not lose you to the tedium that is the medical track, I’ll steer clear of advising you to change your area of study.”*

“Good. Between the two of us, I don’t think I have the patience.” Will rolls his head back. That same smile tugs at his mouth, and he directs it at the ceiling. Can almost imagine the weight, the heat of Hannibal’s body against him. “You knew I’d be busy, though. I told you I would, and I know you didn’t forget, so why’d you really call?”

“Maybe I only wanted to hear your voice.”

Will’s heart stubbornly speeds. “You’re not that sentimental.”

A pause. *“Am I not?”*

Will pauses. Tongue darts out to lick his lips, and feels them dry and cracked, rough. “Not—not usually.”

“Then perhaps I’ll have to remedy your perception of me.”

Will swallows. Shifts, but doesn’t sit up. “Or you could tell me the truth.”

Another pause, this one longer, weighted. Will can read between the lines, now—and he studies every second of silence that Hannibal allows to linger before he lets it fall apart, fall victim to his honest motivations. *“I was wondering how married you are to the idea of a traditional Thanksgiving menu.”*

For a moment, Will says nothing, because what can he say? All he can do is choke back horror, choke back the silent *oh, god* that wants to escape. Because it stands to reason that if Hannibal is all that Will knows him to be, then this wouldn’t be the first time that he gave Will—this isn’t—

Will closes his eyes. Breathes. Swallows. And Wilhelmina curls around his heart and rumbles a soothing sound. Everything is still for a second; smooth, unwrinkled, clear and cold as glass. And when Will opens his eyes again, he finds himself on the other side of that glass. Allows himself to smile. And a second later, allows himself to believe it, to feel it.

Hannibal is a hunter, and so is Will—but he's always been a better fisherman. Allowing Hannibal to present and share his kills will allow this new facet of their relationship to grow, to flourish. The hook of Will's true intentions is buried in the feast Hannibal prepares for them both.

And it's only meat, after all.

"I like everything you make," Will murmurs, and doesn't feel sick at the honesty. Instead, warmed with dark, fond humor he cannot share with Hannibal; not yet. "And yeah, I'm open to other options." Hannibal makes some faint and distant noise that sounds like the manifestation of pride, pleasure. Before he can say anything, Will inhales silently, and exhales. "Maybe I could come over a little early on Thursday and help with the meal prep, if—if you want."

A soft breath. A shuffle on the other end of the line that sounds like him sitting down, nestling in the same way Will has. *"My kitchen is always open to you, Will. I would enjoy that very much."*

The echo of Wilhelmina's pleased purr fills his ears, and before Will knows it, he has echoed it. The measured inhale he hears from Hannibal's end of the line is… settling. Vindicating. Knowing that the sounds of Will's joy warm Hannibal from the inside out is a boon. It gives Will liberty to push, to do anything.

And what he wants right now is to tantalize. To intrigue. To tempt.

Will lowers his voice to something hushed, an admission and a confession in tone, though the words in themselves are innocent enough. "If the offer still stands… I have some venison in the freezer that's… I mean, it's frozen now but it's… fresh."

Licks his lips. Lets Hannibal hear it.

His silence is telling—a wildly whirring mind that is connecting dots, making assumptions from what he knows and what he believes, and where he thinks the two intersect. Where the two are stitched together with threads of silk, swathes of lace. And Will knows Hannibal well enough to know that he just can't help but to prod at the join of those perceptions, ever-the-surgeon inspecting a wound. *"Did you go hunting, Will?"*

Will smiles; fierce, triumphant. Inside him, Wilhelmina glows with pleasure at her protégé's clever casting. Hannibal is a big fish nibbling at a pretty little lure, and *oh,* he *so* wants to consume it. Now that Will can see it, God, it's so obvious. *This* is what Hannibal wants. And Will is in the perfect position to dangle it in front of his face. Hook him. Land him.

Let Hannibal draw his conclusions. Will's not about to show his hand, and his poker face is pristine.

"I…" he says, hesitant and guilty-sounding, quiet and breathy, "I didn't expect to. I just needed to clear my head. But it was dark, and I figured I'd bring the gun because—in case." Exhales hard, and fidgets in place, for Hannibal's benefit rather than his own. Fills the silence with the signals of a racing mind, a weighted conscience. "But, I… if we share it, then it doesn't go to waste, right?"

"Of course," Hannibal replies. And if he were simply a worried partner, that's where the conversation would end. But he's not. *"Were you scared, out there alone in the dark?"*

Will sits forward in the chair. Rests his elbows on his knees. Ducks his head, and his hair falls into his face, creates a curtain that closes him off from the little house, envelops him solely in the sound of Hannibal's voice. "Yes," he whispers honestly. "But I knew I was safe."

Hannibal's quiet. So quiet. The world narrows, constricts, until they are the only two within it. *"Then why did you bring the gun?"*

Why?

Will's vision goes black, and then light, and then he stands within the forest of his mind. At his side is Wilhelmina, wrapped snugly in Hannibal's gray coat. Her hair is loose, free around her shoulders. Her cheeks, wind-chapped; her lips, furiously red. Eyes luminous and blue, gleaming in the moonlight. She watches a figure dart between the trees, and Will stands tall and proud at her side.

It's the monster—or, the monster Will once imagined to be the Ripper, with his slender, clawed fingers and his branching diadem of antlers. They stand together and watch it prowl, watch it pace. Watch it move, a terrifyingly graceful beast that is silent in the underbrush. It leaves footprints, but makes not a single sound.

At Will's side is the gun, its weight borne on a strap slung across his shoulder. He knows who and what it's meant for. But when he looks sidelong at his companion, Wilhelmina glows with power, with pride, with adoration. When she turns, when she retreats, the Ripper follows her like a loyal shadow, and never once does Will fear that she'll be hurt.

And he, too, follows.

"Because I wanted to use it," Will says. Opens his eyes. Pitches his voice into dread that Hannibal is starving for, aching to take into his hands and mold into his own image, so Will gives it to him. "I don't think it would have mattered what I used it on."

"Was it so simple as wanting to use the gun? Or was your craving for power over life and death? The two are very different, Will. One is based in distance, in violence. But the other is entirely human; nearly written into our DNA."

God, he's a master of words. Will's so lucky he's no longer blind, and that he can now appreciate every subtle push for the expertly-crafted maneuver it is.

So Will hesitates, because Hannibal wants him to hesitate. Stalls, because Hannibal expects him to stall. "I guess… I wanted control over something." Lets out a long, tremulous breath that ends in a bereft little whine. Allows himself to sound young, shaken, and scared. Smiles. "I feel so out of control, Hannibal."

Will has never had more control than he does right now.

"I know, beloved," Hannibal murmurs. *"I know."*

On Wednesday night, he takes the venison out of the freezer and puts it in the fridge to thaw until morning. Then Will sends an incomplete and misleading analysis to Jack Crawford. His skin prickles

with anxiety; Jack isn't stupid, and in Will's naivety when this all began, he'd provided Jack with more of the truth than he would have allowed, had he *known* the truth from the beginning.

He can misdirect Jack with mentions of possession, with the portrayal of the paper eagle within the not-Will's chest as a characterization of interpreted fierceness, but also one of inherent objectification. He can say that the plant trimmings are symbols of affection, yes, but symbolize a subconsciously short-lived fascination that, like the leaves and bright blooms, will fade and lose their color, wither and die. He can say a lot of things, and Jack doesn't know the Ripper well enough to refute them.

He has provided Jack with half-lies disguised as honest insight, but words alone will never satisfy him. Jack Crawford will keep looking until he has what he seeks, and he will seek what he believes. Will can change his beliefs, but he knows damn well he's handing Jack a stick figure and calling it a facial composite—sooner or later, it won't be enough.

It can only buy Will time to figure out what the hell he's going to do, and how he's going to get out of this multifaceted mess without losing everything, and getting charged for criminal conspiracy in the process.

He's not sure what he feels; this amalgam of thoughts and emotions is too complex, impossible to simplify. But Will climbs into bed that night and curls up beneath his blankets, and his fingers drift idly across his bare belly—he arches into his own palms, aching for larger, softer hands to touch his chest, his sides, his thighs—and he thinks it might be called desire and ruin, a gorgeous disaster just waiting to happen.

Will wants it anyway.

Wants *him* anyway.

He doesn't call Hannibal, but it's a near thing.

Will stares at himself in the mirror for a long time. Considers a lot of different things. Considers all the ways he could line his eyes, highlight his cheeks. The ways he could fill in his lips, and the colors he could make them, shades of candy-pinks and luscious reds. The things of Margot's he could don like armor, prepare himself for a silent battle of wills, a seduction so thorough that Hannibal would be stricken powerless.

He stares at the person in the mirror, hair plastered to his scalp and neck and shoulders, with lingering lavender circles beneath his eyes, the shadow of stubble growing in and just the faintest bit rough when he brushes the pad of his thumb over his jaw. He sees shoulders that are starting to broaden, and a skinny little waist still stretched thin by his growth spurt a few months back. He's still filling out, still changing—and part of him knows that he won't be able to cling to the way he looks now. There will come a time, probably soon, where he'll no longer be able to skirt that blurred line between genders. Where biology will betray him, and he'll be left with the unknowable gamble of what genetics will make of him in true adulthood.

Will smooths leave-in conditioner through his hair. It dries in soft, rich curls that brush his forehead, his temples, around his neck as he pulls it back into a loose bun at the nape of his neck. When he dresses, there is only the blue button-up that Hannibal gave him the last time he left, sleeves rolled up.

He wiggles into black cotton briefs, then those tailored gray slacks. Wool socks instead of stockings. His worn work boots instead of heels—Will grimaces that he has nothing finer by way of men's footwear, but given the frigid winter weather, it's probably not the worst he could do.

He wears no makeup. He dons no jewelry. He is naked, flayed open, exposed.

Today, he takes the shape of a pretty, clever boy. He's bright-eyed, sharp-tongued, still growing into his own body. Desperate to please, eager and wanting for Hannibal's touch. Remaking his humble country roots in Hannibal's image. Discovering the more refined side of genteel masculinity under Hannibal's guidance. Stripped from his armor, tender neck and pale wrists exposed, ready for whatever shackles Hannibal hopes to bind them together with.

He should be a stranger to himself, but when he smiles at himself in the mirror, it has an edge most often accentuated by eyeliner and lipstick—oh yes, Wilhelmina is as present as she ever is, hiding within him, in plain sight.

Together, they are neither male nor female. Together, they are both. Together, they are no longer content to simply follow Hannibal's lead, the way they have since the pile-up on the Beltway.

Will's eyes are open. That makes this a two-player game, the way it was in the very beginning, when their mutual flirtation was unbound by their romantic ties, based solely in wit and lust. When they tested one another, teased and tempted with flashes of physicality. When it was…

Fun, Wilhelmina purrs. *Playing with him is fun.*

And it was. *Is.* It's the most fun Will's ever had. And if he's tempting fate and courting danger, well, at least he's aware of it now.

And Hannibal's not.

Will gets the venison from the fridge, wrapped in plastic, and puts it into a cooler. It's good fortune that Will often prefers to prepare the gamiest meat first, and had left the tenderloin as-of-yet untouched. Though difficult to extract, the loin is undoubtedly the best cut, a worthy offering—new hunters often unknowingly discard them during the field dressing. Hannibal will see this and see experience, see patience and skill.

Will *wants* his approval. He knows he shouldn't. But, hell, even while desperately wanting to keep a secret of his knowing and have his fun, Will wants to see that glint in Hannibal's eyes, the flash of a carnivore's pleased smile.

He wants. God, he wants so much.

Will checks his pockets; phone, wallet, keys. Turns off all the lights but the one near the back door, makes sure the heat is turned down but still palatable, and that Winston has enough food and water to last him the night. He closes the cooler. Dons Hannibal's coat. Picks up the bag he left in the entryway and tells himself it's not presumptuous to bring an overnight bag, considering the impending forecast, and he's already asked his neighbor to let Winston out this evening—

Oh, who's he kidding. He just wants to see Hannibal's face when he walks in with a duffel bag slung over his shoulder.

With the thought in mind, Will hitches the bags up and sends a text on his way out.

>> headed your way. be there soon.

His expression is just as good as Will expected. Interest, at the cooler. A stunned silence when he sees the duffel. It's followed by something deep and dark, an intrigue and ravenous hunger at Will's presumption that's buried beneath his polite facade and his immaculate clothing. But Hannibal doesn't ask. He doesn't question it. He doesn't turn Will away—instead, he stands aside as Will smiles and crosses the threshold.

Will ducks his chin; inside him, Wilhelmina paces and prowls, full of pride. "I saw the forecast," Will murmurs with lowered lashes by way of explanation. It's a fucking lie, but he's starting to get addicted. "I thought it was better to be prepared in case I can't get home. I hope you don't mind."

Hannibal's fingers curl around the coat's belt. Rather than untying it, he reels Will in, and Will's bags slip off his shoulder at the tug, *thud* as they hit the floor. Blood-red eyes survey his bare face, his soft but messy hair. He leans down and Will tips his face up, accepts the kiss he's offered with pleasure and greed. It doesn't last long enough. "I mind very much, and I'm glad for it, Will. I wanted to ask, but didn't want you to feel pressured."

As Hannibal leans back, Will follows him forward. Is vindicated by the spark of surprise and pleasure that flickers through Hannibal's face, the peaceful bliss as Will nuzzles against his cheek and kisses the corner of his mouth. As quick pecks transform to slow and sensual presses, as Hannibal turns into it and moans his pleasure against Will's teeth. This time, when it breaks, it's because Will is the one to draw away. Hannibal, stunned.

"I'm really sorry for how I treated you before," Will whispers. He's not entirely sorry, but Hannibal will believe he is, and Will is sorry enough that he thinks the apology probably counts. "I was so mad, but it wasn't fair to you. You've been so good to me."

There's *something* in Hannibal's gaze; if Will didn't know better, he might call it *worry.* It's gone as soon as it appears, unknowable. "You were scared for your friend. I assure you, I didn't take it personally."

Liar. Will smiles. Lets his gaze linger on Hannibal's mouth, and then his eyes. Telegraphs his want. "I'm glad."

"Do you feel better?" Hannibal's head tilts, assessing Will's reactions.

"Do I feel less like strangling the life out of Mason Verger? No, not really. I'm still pretty sure I'd enjoy it." Will lets those words sink in as he pulls away, turns to pick up his bags. His expression is smooth when he turns back to face Hannibal and his rapt, searching eyes. "But I'm not thinking about him today. He's not my family, Hannibal. You are."

A moment of silence. Hannibal is too refined for his jaw to hang open, but his lips part and expose the points of his teeth; he licks his lips for lack of any immediate response. He blinks, and it's slow—a big cat unexpectedly finding itself warmed by sunlight and pleased by it. Happier for it. Will can see it there in his eyes well before it reaches the rest of him.

Will reaches out, one hand extended, and takes Hannibal's from where it rests at his side. Winds their fingers together. Tilts his head and offers a smile, a demure lowering of his lashes that have no mascara to accentuate them, no eyeliner to frame the blue of his irises. Like this, he knows the effect is more genuine, less coy. He's counting on it.

Will rubs his thumb over the back of Hannibal's hand. Nudges close. Tilts his chin up and Hannibal doesn't hesitate to cradle Will's jaw and kiss him again, lick into his mouth and taste the sentiment from his tongue and teeth.

God, it's good. Will's never had anything in his life that felt like this, ever. And he'll be damned before he throws it away.

Will murmurs his pleasure, even as they pull apart. Echoes Hannibal's slow blink, contented, as he pulls at the belt of his coat and undoes it, one-handed. Toes out of his boots. "I hope you don't mind that I didn't really… dress up."

"You're wearing what I gave you." His eyes gleam, possessively pleased. Prowls around Will to help him remove the coat without dropping his cargo, one arm at a time. His hands linger on Will's shoulders, smooth down his back, and Will shifts into it; shivers, when Hannibal's lips touch his ear. "If you're referring to your makeup, you are just as handsome without it as you're beautiful with it. I have no preference but to have you exactly as you wish to be, and nothing less."

"Oh, is that all?" Will tips his head back, huffs a laugh with a lowered voice. "You seem to like seeing me in your things." Will is freed from the coat; inhales when he hears it hit the floor, swiftly followed by Hannibal's arms around his waist, his heat at Will's back, his mouth at the nape of Will's neck. He edges his teeth along the tender skin there and Will shudders hard. Whispers, "Ah, *fuck—"*

"I'll admit I'm terribly selfish," Hannibal murmurs. "Yes, darling, I like seeing you in fine things. I like knowing that I've given them to you, and that you wear them for me. It satisfies my aesthetic sensibilities."

"It satisfies your possessive ones," Will replies with a breathless laugh. "You like that others see it and know I'm yours."

Hannibal rumbles his approval, spreads his hands over Will's belly, which jumps and shivers beneath his touch. But Will just can't leave well enough alone, and never could.

" A strange but pretty stray you rescued and collared," he says. *"Kept.* Like a pet."

All movement stops. Even the rise and fall of Hannibal's chest against his back goes still. The grip around him loosens, gentles. Those hands fall away, and Will is left bereft of his smoldering heat. Hannibal's voice is quiet. Almost wounded, and for his part, sounds discontent to be so. "Is that what you think?"

Just for a second, he thinks the answer might be *yes.* Will turns, reaches out, searches for his eyes and finds him stricken and stung. Truly, because he can see how Hannibal tries to hide it beneath a veneer of indifference. Will steps close. Touches Hannibal's cheeks, and slips his fingers back into his hair, thick and almost rough as it slides between the webbing of his fingers. He likes the feeling of it. He likes messing it up.

Not anymore.

“No, that’s not what I think. That’s what *they* think.” Will catches his eyes. Holds them. Tilts his head, and Hannibal mirrors it. He has his hands in the mane of his lion, but the threat of teeth doesn’t scare him. “Pets are domesticated. Dogs do tricks. They do what they’re told. They’ll fetch on command. Sit pretty… roll over.”

Will’s lashes lower. In his palms, Hannibal bristles at the implication, offended on Will’s behalf; his lip twitches with the beginnings of a snarl, and Will’s voice softens. Forces him to be silent, if he wants to hear what Will has to say.

He’s silent.

Good boy.

“I’m not a well-bred bitch. I don’t have a pedigree. But you’ve never made me feel like I’m lesser for not being like you.” Will’s hands smooth down to his shoulders, and chooses his next words carefully. “You don’t want to change me. You take me as I am. And that makes me want to be better. Less rough. More refined. I don’t want to disappoint you. I want you to be proud of me, and…”

The truth of it spears him suddenly, and Will’s shoulders hunch. His gaze drops. It hurts a little, realizing how much he means it. Even in the depths of whatever game this is between them, he means it.

“I want you to be proud that I’m yours.”

The bags start to slip from his shoulder; without missing a beat, Hannibal catches them. Exhales. Takes them from Will, and hoists them himself, then reaches out to brush the backs of his knuckles down Will’s side, rib cage to hip. “Will. Look at me, mylimasis.”

It takes a while for Will to quell the crashing waves inside him, but Hannibal is patient. He waits. And when the unexpected and unwelcome flare of worry settles once more, Will looks up at him. Hannibal’s brow is furrowed, his eyes piercing and intense; he slips one arm around Will’s waist, ducks his head, touches his lips to the apple of Will’s cheek.

“There has never been and will never *be* another who can compare to you. In the spirit of the holiday, I am thankful everyday that you’re mine.” He brushes his lips over Will’s fragile eyelid, his temple, his furrowed brow. “I want to see you have all that you deserve. I want to be the one to give it to you.”

His hand fists in the back of Will’s shirt, pulls it taut. Will lifts his head to see the tension in his jaw, the tight lines around his eyes that soften only when he notices Will is looking. Then fall to the bag slung over his shoulder: the cooler.

“Dogs are domesticated animals,” Hannibal says quietly. “Their quarry are vermin, or they retrieve shot fowl and carry them gently in their mouths at their master’s beck and call. Even wolves hunt in packs to take down big game.” His other hand rests on the soft lid of the insulated bag. Settles there, like the contents inside are precious. “But what you’ve done is much more than that, because you’ve hunted it by yourself. You have no master. You are the pinnacle of millions of years of evolution. And you’ve brought me a gift—your prey for us to share. In spite of everything you’re going through, you’re here today with me. I have never in my life been more proud of anyone than I am of you. That you are mine. That I am yours.”

Silence.

A moment where all stands still, and then the words hit Will like a punch to the gut, and he is abruptly left pained, left breathless. It aches in his chest, his belly, his spine. It pulls a terrible sound from his throat; some garbled version of Hannibal's name. He doesn't fight when Hannibal pulls him in, when his face tucks into the curve of a strong neck and shoulder, when Hannibal's palm smooths up his back and gently squeezes the nape of his neck.

How swiftly the tables turn. How quickly Hannibal can reverse things on him without even knowing it, leaving Will weak-kneed, Wilhelmina savagely affectionate as they dig their nails into his waist and hold him close. The two of them make up one wounded animal that clutches desperately for their mate. That hears words of devotion and is hobbled by them.

Weak. He's weak, but he can't choose *not* to be.

The only thing he can do is make Hannibal weak *with* him. It'll have to be enough.

Will presses his mouth against the thrum of Hannibal's pulse and feels it throb. Closes his eyes as he nuzzles under the curve of his jaw, and is not nearly as furious as he should be when Hannibal gently shushes him, purrs affection, pets him.

"You're family, Will," Hannibal murmurs. "I'm happy you're here."

Will searches for his lips, kisses him again and again, barely enough time to take a breath between them, and barely enough time to taste before they diverge and converge once more. When Hannibal cups his cheek, it lengthens. Deepens. Frantic pecks become starving exchanges, call and response. Will moans as he's crowded back against the front door, pinned there with the weight of Hannibal's body and undivided attention. As he licks into Will's mouth. Catches Will's lower lip between his teeth and tugs.

"Oh—" Will gasps, stricken by strong desire, and a simultaneous memory. "Mm, Hannibal—hey, wait, are you already cooking?"

A pause. A sigh, almost frustrated. One more slow, lingering kiss that weakens the set of Will's spine. "I am."

Will tips his head back, breaks away. Closes his eyes. Laughs helplessly. "Damn it."

"Indeed." But when Will finally opens his eyes again, Hannibal looks intensely, terribly fond. "I'm fortunate to have you here to save me from myself."

"To save you from *my*self," Will mutters. One more kiss, and—*fuck*. He sighs hard. "Remind me that we have all day."

"We do." Hannibal's gaze sharpens; a wolfish smile pulls at his mouth and exposes his sharp teeth. "And all night."

"And all night," Will echoes. Licks his lips, and arches with a quiet gasp when Hannibal leans in to nip at his stubbled jaw, at his exposed and tender throat. He parts his lips and tastes Will's pulse, and sucks a small, aching pinpoint of sensation to the place where his lifeblood flows. *"God. Hannibal."*

He licks over the bruise; when he hums his amusement and pleasure, Will feels it in his spine. "Forgive me. You're irresistible."

Will bares his teeth and works his hands between them with the sole thought of retaliation; spreads his hands wide over Hannibal's chest, skims over his abdomen, careless of whether he wrinkles the wine-

red button down. Ghosts his fingertips over Hannibal's belt buckle, just shy of the half-hard heat of his cock. Hannibal's whole body twitches as he rears back to stare at Will in surprise, and Will grins as amber-red is consumed by fat, ravenous pupils. Will traces outward, hooks his fingers into Hannibal's pocket, and feels his thigh flex beneath fine, dark fabric.

Will glances up through his lashes. *Tugs.* "I can give as good as I get, you know. You shouldn't tease me."

Hannibal exhales between his teeth. His eyes glitter with intrigue. "...I can see that."

"I'm sure you can." Will smiles. Tips his head back against the door and watches him with lazy desire. Walks his index and middle fingers up Hannibal's side, to the strap looped over his shoulder. "Don't you want to see what I brought you?"

"Yes," he breathes. He doesn't move.

Will's smile widens into a grin, aching cheeks and crinkled eyes; chest warm, heart fluttering. Wilhelmina paces within the cage of their bones. She wants it as badly as Hannibal. It's to *all* of their good fortune that Will still wants to play. "You're so transparent."

Hannibal leans in. Doesn't touch him, but places his palms flat on the door on either side of Will's head. He tilts his head. God, his eyes are dark. "Am I?"

"Yeah." Will laughs, breathless. "We can ruin dinner and go upstairs, or you can bring me to the kitchen now and we can fuck later." He beams at the fine shiver that rolls through Hannibal's body, the flash of his teeth. Zeroes in on his soft underbelly, and goes for the killing strike. "I'm not opposed to pizza, so it's up to you."

Hannibal doesn't recoil, not *quite.* His brow furrows. His nose crinkles, like even the *thought* of the smell of grease is offensive. "Everywhere is closed for the holiday," he says, maybe just to be contrary.

Fortunately, Will is more experienced with Middle America than Hannibal seems to be. He barks a laugh. "There's definitely Domino's. Pizza Hut. Little Caeser's. Take your pick. If it pays minimum wage, I guarantee it's open."

"Abhorrent."

He looks so put-out that Will almost wants to kiss him again. He doesn't, but he *almost* does. "That's why I said it's up to you."

Hannibal purses his lips. Huffs. Loops one arm around Will, and uses it to draw his back from the front door; locks the deadbolt with the other. "Terrible thing. You make an effective argument. Although…" Hannibal draws Will close to his side and leads him from the entryway. Somewhere behind them, Will's borrowed coat remains on the floor. "...it would have ruined your offering as well."

Will relaxes into his hold with a satisfied sound, and casts him a sidelong glance that's decidedly flirtatious. "If you've changed your mind, there's enough ice packs to keep it cold for another hour… or several."

"Will," Hannibal says. It's scolding. Wanting. Undeniably exasperated and amused.

Will beams and rolls his head back onto Hannibal's shoulder as he's guided over the kitchen threshold. "Just saying," he murmurs. "We have options."

Hannibal's eyes glimmer when he sees the tenderloin, a certain intentness to his gaze as he inspects the way it was butchered and trimmed. It sends a thrill to Will's belly, which only magnifies at the broad and sharp-edged smile he receives, a vessel to carry and convey Hannibal's approval. Will wants to gorge himself on it.

And the reality is that Will *does* know better, so he *does* know that Hannibal's unfettering cheer is entirely because of him. He's surprised by Will's hunting prowess, though he won't say as much for concern of insulting Will *with* his surprise. He's intrigued by the potential. He prowls like a beast, preening and prideful at the skill of his mate. As he passes behind Will to gather a cutting board and a chef's knife, his fingers trail over Will's lower back in a sensual caress; blatant desire and pleasure.

Will's teeth sink into his lower lip. He tries not to shiver and fails.

"A cut this fine is to be savored," Hannibal says as he places his tools on the counter top. Turns to Will and spears him with a smile, glowing with fondness. "It will carry flavor well, buts its own flavor should be appreciated. I think a simple spice rub and pan-sear would suit, perhaps served with a sauce."

Will lowers his lashes, bites back a smile before he lets it overtake him. He doesn't bother to hide how pleased he is by Hannibal's approval. That was, after all, the goal. "I'll defer to your expertise, Chef."

"Excellent." Hannibal holds out his hand and Will goes to him without hesitation. Allows himself to be led to the spice cabinet, more hand-labeled glass jars full of spices than Will is sure he's ever even heard of. "I often find that scent lends itself beautifully to anticipating the flavor of a dish. Memory, of course, is invaluable. But when experimenting with new flavor combinations, one can often get a sense of what will work together based solely on the olfactory sense."

He plucks a jar of tannish powder from a shelf and brings it down; unscrews the lid and hands it to Will. His eyes linger, heavy and intent, as Will brings it to his nose and inhales.

"Nutmeg," Will says, and shoots him a chiding glance. "I think everyone knows nutmeg."

But the tease only makes him chuckle. Hannibal reaches for another. "Fine. Something less common."

It's certainly *something*—flower-shaped, maybe the size of his thumb. Will frowns and inhales; the scent is strong but familiar. "Smells like licorice." His nose wrinkles.

"Star anise," Hannibal replies. Grabs another that is filled with something that looks like disembodied fruit stems.

This one Will doesn't have to guess. "Cloves."

"Good." Hannibal pulls down a small square of white cloth and a length of twine, then closes the cabinet. He nudges Will with his hip. "The rest we'll use fresh. Fridge."

Will balances the jars carefully in his hands and goes as directed. Against his will, his cheeks flare with heat. From the flash of Hannibal's teeth in a sharp smile, Will knows he's thinking the same thing. Huffs, gentle and amused. "Not this time, mylimasis."

The wave of cold from the fridge makes Will shiver as it's opened. Hannibal reaches for a cardboard carton of blackberries, the kind more frequently used at farmers' markets. "Should I even ask where you got in-season blackberries?"

Hannibal shoots him an amused glance. "I happen to have an acquaintance with a greenhouse from whom I source most of my produce. She is an avid gardener and a chemist who balances the pH of the soil she uses to grow with hand-selected fertilizer. I find the taste to be far superior, and I prefer to support local businesses when possible, especially one so specialized and passionate about their work."

Will huffs through his nose as Hannibal places the carton in his unoccupied hand. "When's the last time you went to a chain-market grocery store?"

"I prefer not to. But I'd guess when I was in my undergrad, perhaps." Hannibal closes the door, then plucks a lemon from a bowl of produce on the counter top. "This should be all. How familiar are you with fresh herbs?"

Will frowns as he turns and places his cargo on the counter. "Reasonably. Why?"

He opens a drawer and plucks a pair of kitchen shears from it; holds them out handle-first and inclines his head. "Basil and mint, from the planters in the dining room?"

Will rolls his eyes as he takes the shears. He doesn't dignify that with a response; Hannibal for his part, looks awfully amused and holds his palms up in contrition. Will sniffs haughtily as he exits. *"How familiar are you with herbs,"* Will mutters under his breath. Then calls, "I'm not a *total* heathen, you know!"

He's pretty sure he hears Hannibal laughing. Despite the flare of annoyance, it fills Will's chest with warmth. Maybe it should be worrisome, how much Will genuinely enjoys him. How easy the banter seems to come. How much it lights him up inside whenever Hannibal smiles.

Maybe it should be. But there's a certain contentment in knowing that the Ripper, that *Hannibal* is not solely a monster. The veneer of civility he wears *does* hold a true person underneath—a man who is rooted closely to his instincts, and is capable of monstrous things.

But a man nonetheless.

"How much do you want?" Will asks loudly.

"A handful of each is enough," Hannibal replies. The golden light of the kitchen spills into the dimly lit dining room; it illuminates the long table, the high-backed chairs, the horns on the mantle. The painting between them. Will stares at it for a moment as he turns, herbs in hand, and blinks. He hasn't noticed it before. It's… something.

He returns to the kitchen. "I can kind of understand the Williams and Sonoma art-deco gothic thing. But what the hell is that painting in the dining room?"

Hannibal blinks; accepts the herbs and the offered shears as he processes that statement—the former, most likely, rather than the latter. Will's sure he's aware of the painting. It's difficult to miss. "Leda

and the Swan? It's a visualization of the Greek myth."

Will shoots him a look. Raises an eyebrow. "It's a visualization, alright."

It's a damn good thing Hannibal seems to find him funny. He huffs through his nose as he puts the shears away, then goes to rinse the herbs in the sink. "In the sixteenth century, depicting sexual intercourse in art was widely frowned upon. The paradox therein that the subject gained significant traction among artists of the time, and the depiction of a woman and a swan was more socially acceptable than painting a woman lying with a man."

Hannibal turns off the sink, blots the herbs dry on a kitchen towel beside it. Then he returns to Will and steps behind him. Turns him. Leads him to the counter. Will's breathing stutters as Hannibal guides him in the motion of stacking the basil leaves, then rolling them. Covers Will's right hand with his own. Curls around it with strong and steady fingers as Will picks up the knife.

"The piece holds merit in modern social contexts. The perceived obscenity of portraying consenting sexual relations, compared to the societal indifference to violence. The translations of the original myth are mixed in their portrayal of the incident: whether Leda was violated by Zeus, as he was wont to do—or whether she consented to him in his monstrous form."

Hannibal is warm against his back. Each word rumbles through Will's ribs. Hannibal's lips brush the shell of his ear as the knife rocks in their hold, slicing through the leaves with ease. They bleed traces of green on the cutting board, fill Will's nose with the scent. It's heady. Earthy. And yet, Will can barely focus on anything but the sound of Hannibal's voice.

"Leda was a woman of great power, a Spartan queen. On the same night that Zeus came to her, she also lay with her husband. As the tale goes, she bore four children. Clytemnestra and Castor from her husband, Polydeuces and Helen from Zeus. A woman who gave birth to the children of a king and the children of a god, all of them equally monstrous and exceptional in their own ways. Boucher's rendition of her coupling with Zeus is arguably one of the least explicit. Da Vinci, Correggio, Michelangelo. Many of the originals were destroyed, but the fascination survives in modern art, and in modern viewers. A reproduction of the original da Vinci has its home in the Uffizi, not so far from the masterpieces of Botticelli, on display for thousands of eyes to see every day."

His teeth gently, so gently, close around Will's earlobe. Beneath his steady palm, Will's hand trembles on the knife. His lips part on a shaken exhale, and Hannibal chuckles. Withdraws. Kisses his temple, the apple of his cheek.

"It's a conversation starter. It seems to have done its job."

"Is this a conversation?" Will says breathlessly, and presses back to feel the solid weight of Hannibal's body against him. "Or a sexually-charged art history lecture?"

Hannibal's mouth traces back behind his ear, touches his tongue to the dimple where Will's jaw meets his neck, a pinpoint flash of heat and wetness. Testing. Tasting. "That depends on whether or not you find it sexually stimulating, instead of intellectually."

Will shivers. Takes in a breath, and huffs a laugh as their hands slow to a stop. Does not deign to answer *that* particular question. "I call bullshit. You might call it a conversation starter, but I think you just like to shock people—to have your high brow *friends* see art like this, and know it's historically valuable and above their reproach, but it's also obscene. You have people over in groups. Not often. Enough to pull intrigue and convince people to come. Some have been here before, some haven't.

You cook for them, the whole song and dance. It keeps you in with their in-crowd, but it makes them feel chosen. Special, to sit at your table with you when most don't get to."

Will sets down the knife, then gasps when Hannibal's dominant hand lets go of his in favor of spreading warm and wide over his belly. His fingertips dig in, just a little. Pulls Will back against him. Presses harder at the testing flex of Will's muscles beneath the thin shirt and tender skin.

Will wonders if there'll be bruises. He hopes so.

"You think it's funny: the second of processing before the new person realizes what they're seeing. And then it gets a little awkward while they wait to see if anyone else has noticed. They don't want to be the one to bring it up, give away their newness, or seem like they don't belong. They look at you—and you know what they're thinking, but you can pretend that you don't. Maybe the brave ones make a joke. Maybe Ms. Komeda did, and it turned into a lively debate. She made it fun. *Intellectually stimulating.* But there's not many like her. The weak ones go back to dinner and never say anything, but you catch them looking at it and trying not to. You have this whole mythos and censorship spiel prepared just in case someone says something. They usually don't, but it doesn't matter, does it? You don't actually want to debate. You just like to watch them squirm."

Hannibal's grip on him tightens until it hurts. God, it's *thrilling,* knowing the monster's claws for what they are .

"For how accurate you are, you could have been here," Hannibal says. It's quiet. Hushed. Intense. *Starving.* "Do you find it cruel?"

"No," Will breathes. He bites back a moan as Hannibal's fingers curl, scratch him through the soft cotton. "There will always be those who know how to play the game, and those who expect it to cater to them and think they're entitled to winning. That's not cruelty, Hannibal, it's karma."

The sound that radiates into Will's back and spine is too savage to be called a purr, too gentle to be a growl. It just sounds like approval, and Will relaxes into his hands to savor the sensation. His eyes flutter closed and his lips spread a smile when he feels Hannibal curl around him, his other arm anchored across Will's chest, his mouth against Will's hair. "And which do you believe I am?"

Of course. Will hums his amusement; arches his neck, and is rewarded with the promising press of teeth. "That depends. Do you believe you're entitled to win?"

"Always."

Will grins. Shows his teeth, as Hannibal's edge along the fragile skin of his neck, sharp as a wolf's fangs. The Ripper has never had a propensity for biting—he's far too controlled, too careful. But Will wonders if it's from an excess of caution, rather than a lack of desire to do so. Wonders if, under the right circumstances, Hannibal might leave a mark on him that shows more obviously than his influence. Something for all eyes to see.

Will's head tips back. It presses Hannibal's mouth against him until he can feel each perilous point, pressure on a razor's-edge of pain. He *feels* the bitten-off snarl in the pounding of his pulse. "There's a difference between being entitled and being confident," he says. "Being confident you'll win because you know how to navigate the chessboard is a different kind of pride."

His voice is dark. Hot. "Is it not hubris regardless?"

Will huffs. Rolls his spine and pushes his ass back against the warmth of Hannibal's cock, if only to feel the way his teeth *almost* clench shut. "To break the rules effectively, you have to know them first. That takes… experience." Will arches. Smiles. Moans as he wriggles and Hannibal hisses, holds him still. Will's eyes go half-lidded, distant, staring at the far wall, a lazy arousal and confidence within his ribs. Whether now or later, he knows he'll get what he wants. "I am… definitely open to more experience, if you've changed your mind about dinner."

He gasps as Hannibal crushes Will against his body, thrusts his confined cock against Will's ass, the hand at his belly pressing in and *fuck* , Will wonders if Hannibal were inside him right now if he'd feel it against his fingertips—

The thought is ruinous.

But worse yet is that Hannibal lets him go.

Will finds himself cold, unmoored, turned-on and slightly breathless and he *whines* , turns with wanting, pleading eyes toward the source of his affliction. And what he finds is— *god,* Hannibal backed up against the opposite counter, gripping white-knuckled at the granite behind him. Head ducked. Eyes closed. Breathing slowly, but his chest heaves and his teeth are bared and the line of his erection is unmistakable, and Will's mouth is so goddamn wet.

He won't say *please,* though he desperately wants to. And he won't close the distance and *take* like Wilhelmina is snarling for him to do.

Will tips his head back, up, chin toward the ceiling and sighs hard. "Fuck." Laughs helplessly, even as his gut clenches with arousal just at the memory of the sight of him. His monster, unhinged. All for him. And denying him still.

Will knows he could push. He could break Hannibal's control if he went to his knees right now. He probably wouldn't even hesitate, but—

But Will can't do that. Not in this stage of the game. He needs Hannibal secure in his knowledge of his own control, no matter how Will edges him toward becoming that feral thing he works so hard to hide.

Will wants it to sense his shape in the dark, smell his scent in its den. He wants it to ache for its mate. He wants it to know him.

Know him, but not see him. Not yet.

"I seem to have awakened a monster," Hannibal says, and Will's eyes snap to him. His untidy hair. His wrinkled shirt, the front of his slacks distended. Will meets blood-red eyes, a ravenous gaze shuttered behind that veil of control once again, though Hannibal's persistent arousal says otherwise. His smile is small but viciously handsome in the clear acknowledgement of his own defeat, and Will memorizes it. Savors it.

Will takes a breath. Lets it out, and licks his lips. His eyes dart down and up again. "In you or in me?"

Hannibal huffs. "I think we're both similarly affected."

"Point." Will hangs his head. Tries to focus on something distinctly *un*sexy. Fails. "God."

"At this rate, we may not eat before midnight."

Will's head snaps up; he barks out a stunned laugh at Hannibal's crooked grin, his lowered lashes. The way his gaze drags over Will with tangible weight, heat, and Will knows in this moment Hannibal is creating memories of his own. Their eyes meet in the middle, and when Hannibal blinks it's contented and slow, and Will returns his smile. "So we should probably *actually* get started, huh?"

"That would be a step in the right direction, yes." Hannibal rubs one hand over his face, still seeming in good humor. His knuckles are still pale from gripping the counter, but Will doesn't say anything about it. "I think, perhaps, we should divide and conquer. In order to avoid any further temptation, since you seem to enjoy making me lose my self control."

"That sounds reasonable." Will tilts his head, rolls his shoulders, closes his eyes. Pretends not to notice Hannibal's eyes locked on him as he stretches. Arches. Touches his own belly as he turns and savors the scratches that still dully throb beneath his shirt. Grins, as he faces away, ignoring Hannibal's short, sharp exhalation.

Picks up the knife, and deftly chops the mint without a word. Frowns at the cloth square, considers it. Bundles the cloves and the star anise within it, as well as the aromatic herbs. Ties it closed with a length of twine, and tosses it into the waiting, empty saucepan. He needs one cup of sugar, one cup of water, a quarter cup of balsamic vinegar. Add the blackberries, and boil until they begin to burst. Lemon squeezed in at the end, and remove the herb sachet to create a flavorful but pleasantly-textured compote. Seems simple enough.

He turns to get the water and stops still. Hannibal has been watching, head tilted, expression unreadable as he gazes at the saucepan. "Perhaps I *have* underestimated you."

Will tries to bite back his grin. He fails, but casts Hannibal a glance through his lashes as he brings a measuring cup to the sink. "Don't worry, Chef," he says as he sidles by. Inside him, Wilhelmina preens at Hannibal's admission, and Will lifts his chin in pride. "I haven't outgrown you yet. I still have a lot to learn."

They set the table with multiple small plates, diverse but moderate portions. Prosciutto roses blooming atop split figs with delicate honeycomb. Hasselback potatoes with gruyere, chives, and truffle oil. Sage and sausage stuffing thickened with quail-egg yolks. A warm salad of brussel sprouts and bacon with smoked feta and candied pecans. Spice-rubbed venison tenderloin medallions with blackberry compote.

A spiral-sliced glazed ham that smells decadently of bourbon, molasses, and dijon.

The knowledge of what they're almost certainly eating has surprisingly little effect on how much Will enjoys both the food and the experience of sharing it with Hannibal. He doesn't call attention to the fact that he notices Hannibal's rapt stare as he takes the first bite, but for every moment after Will's visceral, satisfied sound of enjoyment, Hannibal glows.

The table is large, but they sit close together with Will cozy and contented at Hannibal's left hand. It's intimate. Quiet. Candle-lit, with opulent porcelain dishware and weighty silver cutlery, the history of which Hannibal details and smiles at Will's genuine, wide-eyed hesitance at touching any of it

thereafter. He knows opulence is part and parcel to sharing in Hannibal's life, but none of it it never seems to lose the hard edge of surrealism—where he is. Who he sits with, their feet brushing beneath the table, and who laughs as Will pointedly looks at Leda suspended above them with an exasperated slip of a smile and a roll of his eyes.

They don't linger in the dining room long after they're finished; instead, Will insists upon helping him clear away the plates and store what leftovers remain.

"Will," Hannibal murmurs, fond but scolding. "You're my guest."

But Will stuns him to silence when he lifts his eyes and nudges their shoulders together and replies, "If I'm family, I'm not a guest."

Hannibal doesn't have a ready-made reply to that, and Will treasures every second of his quiet contemplation afterward as they wash and dry the dishes, hip-to-hip.

Will turns the gas fireplace on in the study while Hannibal heats mulled wine on the rangetop, sweet and fragrant as the blackberry compote had been. It's not so different from a few nights ago. It's completely different from a few nights ago. Both everything and nothing has changed, except this time there is thick snow falling outside the window, and Will rises from the floor when Hannibal enters, takes the steaming mug he's offered, and sits beside Hannibal on that little green couch with his legs folded beneath him, held up entirely by the weight of Hannibal's body and tucked beneath his arm.

And as the wine drains down and their cups are placed on Hannibal's desk behind them, as they turn sideways with Hannibal supported by the arm of the chair and Will sprawled across his chest, Will realizes that he's *happy.* As he tucks his face into Hannibal's throat, arms around his waist, bracketed by his thighs, Will is fully entangled with the Chesapeake Ripper and he feels *safe.*

The forefront of Will's mind is wine-warm and fuzzy, a pleasant and comfortable haze of contentment and affection. In this, here and now, he is something base, something animal. It carries with it no desperate urgency, but rather a slow, insistent heat.

Will stretches and purrs and parts his lips over Hannibal's jugular, laps at the skin there and smiles when he stiffens. His pulse throbs against Will's tongue. When his breathing pauses, Will nuzzles under the curve of his jaw.

Hannibal may be a big cat, but Will's no slouch, himself. "Hannibal?"

His hand settles at the nape of Will's neck. Whether he'll push Will closer or pull him away is yet to be seen. "Yes, Will?"

"I think you were supposed to remind me of something." Will nurses at blood-hot skin, too gentle to leave a bruise—yet.

Hannibal's fingers curl. Tighten. Loosen. He kneads at Will's spine, so good it makes him shiver. "Was I?"

"That we have all night, I think is what you said."

A pause. Hannibal stills, and the room is abruptly warmer for it. "So I did." His touch gentles; his knuckles traverse the valleys of Will's vertebrae, thumb diping beneath the collar of Will's shirt. "How remiss of me."

Will's palm spreads out over Hannibal's sternum, and with a heave and flex of his muscles, pushes himself upright. Inches forward. Settles on Hannibal's lap, straddling his hips. Revels in the fat, dark depths of his pupils and the way his lips part as he stares up at Will.

Will glances sidelong to the window, the white flakes that stand out against the hazy night as they fall. He returns his attention to Hannibal with a pointed incline of his head. "Pretty sure it's after dark."

Hannibal doesn't blink. Doesn't look away. "So it is."

Will hooks his index finger through the slit between Hannibal's shirt buttons. Tugs—not hard enough to damage anything, but it's impossible to miss. His lashes lower. Rolls his hips, and inhales when Hannibal grabs them. Steadies him. Not quite holding him still, but…

Will ducks his head, nudges his nose along Hannibal's. Their foreheads touch, lips just fractions of an inch apart. Hannibal's eyes are wide open, even as he rubs his thumbs over the wool-concealed ridges of Will's hip bones. Even as Will's lashes flutter and he sighs, and their mingled breath tastes of sweet, spiced wine. Even as Will reaches back to find one hand and guides it to the button of the fine slacks Hannibal gave him.

Will tilts his chin. Laps at Hannibal's lower lip. Sinks his teeth into it, slow and sensual, and breaks away only when he feels that button pop open.

He didn't ask before. He doesn't ask now, not really. But he does arch and sigh and whisper, "Please."

"Will." Hannibal's eyes are half-lidded and heavy; his other hand slips below Will's waistband and pulls free the tails of his shirt. Untucks, so his palm can slip beneath and touch bare skin, set his fingernails to those sensitive phantom scratches he left before, now faded. "We don't have protection —"

Will kisses him, licks into his mouth, and shivers when Hannibal growls. Pulls at the buttons of his own shirt with one hand, and moans when Hannibal catches on to what he's up to. Holds the fabric steady so Will can slip each one from its confines, free him just a little bit more from the fine garments Hannibal gave him.

All of him, Hannibal's. Inside and out.

And all of Hannibal, *his.*

"We didn't use a condom before," Will whispers and rocks in place on Hannibal's lap. Feels his cock thickening beneath the curve of his ass and *grinds.*

Hannibal bares his teeth and presses up into Will's weight. "It was impulsive of us."

Will exhales sharp and short. Works at the last of the buttons open at his collar. "Too late now."

"It doesn't have to be—"

Light flashes behind Will's eyes, too bright and blinding to be red. The last button slips free; his hands go to Hannibal's shoulders immediately, push him back, *down,* until he is pinned to the arm of the couch with Will's fingernails curled and poised at the base of his throat. His pupils blow wide, dark and furiously incensed, but not more so than Will—and within him, Wilhelmina. "Why? Do you plan on having other partners?"

Hannibal goes silent. Stares up at Will until the hard lines around his eyes start to fade. Until his clear instinct to fight off any and all threats is tempered by the weight of Will's words, rather than the sting of his claws. He licks his lips. Will doesn't budge, doesn't blink. And Hannibal doesn't relent, doesn't show his neck, but the trembling tension in his muscles starts to ease. Instead, he holds perfectly still, and though the visible anger fades, there is something deep in the darkness of his eyes that stares out at Will, and may very well *see* him.

"No, mylimasis," Hannibal says. Slowly, but without hesitation, he places one of his hands over Will's. Not trying to pull him away, no—pushing *down.* Flattening the spread of Will's hand, until it rests against his chest, just below his throat, so that Will can feel the beat of his heart. "Never again, for as long as I live. Just you."

Strong. Steady. Neither speeding or slowing, and—

It's the truth. And it's not just the truth of Hannibal Lecter, but also—

Will is shaken. Blinks hard. Ducks his head, and waits for his vision to clear. *Their* vision. For Wilhelmina, too, is quiet. All the while, Hannibal's pulse thrums against his palm. He had hoped and dared to think that even after all the lies that maybe just one thing could be true, and it *is*.

Hannibal loves him. Won't ever have another *but* him.

Will exhales slowly. God, his teeth hurt. He just—wants—

Will bends and touches his cheek to Hannibal's carotid. Rocks forward with a wounded sound and rubs up against Hannibal's stomach. Slides his arms around Hannibal's neck, and hides his face within them. And when the words come out, they stun him with their cutting honesty, but Will's helpless to stop them before they spill blood. His own.

"I want to erase everyone who came before me." His breath stutters when Hannibal's hands return to Will's hips; grip *hard* and guide him in a slow, rolling grind. Fuck. "All of them. I don't care who they were. I don't care if you loved them. I don't *care* if it's fucked up—oh *fuck,* Hannibal!"

God, it's tight. Hot. So fucking good, and—

He feels the flash of Hannibal's teeth against his shoulder as he snarls, "To erase them, Will, I'd first have to remember them."

"Nnngh, *God.*" Will's cock throbs. His body twitches with the force of it, and Hannibal's eyes glitter dark and half-mad as Will pulls back, pulls himself out of his shirt. As his hands shake and fumble at the zipper fly. As Hannibal, too, hastily undoes his wine-red button up and balls it in his hands, casts it carelessly to fall somewhere on the floor.

Hannibal taps Will's outer thigh, firm and insistent, and growls, "Up. On your knees."

And it's a good goddamn thing that Will *hasn't* been on his knees before now, because surely that would have made them give out.

His thighs ache and tremble as Will lifts himself, but it only takes a moment for Hannibal to hook his thumbs into the waistband and pull the unyielding fabric down over his ass in one go—black cotton briefs and all. Will hisses as his cock is exposed to the air; yelps as Hannibal shoves at the slacks and the zipper creaks and pops in protest at being wrenched apart too hard. "Shit—"

A broad palm cups Will's shin; lifts it from the couch, and he hurries to brace himself on Hannibal's shoulders as he's forcibly, hastily undressed. Hannibal repeats the rough treatment with Will's other leg, and leans in to mouth at Will's jugular as he peels it all free. "I'll replace them."

Will claws at his shoulders as Hannibal nips. It stings. It's *good.* "You bought them."

Broad, burning palms cup the back of his thighs and pull Will forward; he whines as his tender erection rubs against Hannibal's pants, surely much more expensive than his own. The texture almost hurts, and he flushes at the passing thought that he'll stain them. Maybe irreversibly.

"Then they're mine to ruin as I please, aren't they?" The low, heated tone of his voice implies the rest. *Aren't you?*

Yes, Wilhelmina growls. *And he's ours to destroy.*

The thought is… intriguing. Liberating. And Will wants that fiercely. He scrapes his nails over Hannibal's shoulder through the thick, wiry patch of his chest hair. Down his belly. Under his fly and the elastic waist of his boxer-briefs, trapping Will's wrist in close, his angle awkward at best as he puts his mouth to Hannibal's neck. He nips and sucks and rolls tender flesh between his teeth as he palms Hannibal's cock.

Hannibal hisses; Will's pants hit the floor, forgotten, and Hannibal cups his ass, spreads him open. Presses the pads of his fingers against Will's hole and chuckles at his shameless moan.

"That's right, sweet thing," Hannibal purrs, thrusts up into Will's grip. Rubs at Will's rim with shivering sensation, but doesn't push deeper. "Tell me what you want."

He's mindful. Attentive.

But this isn't his game, it's Will's.

The thought settles inside him; the desire for control, for nothing short of razing Hannibal to the ground. Will lifts his head and rolls his hips, leans in. Presses his forehead to Hannibal's and lets his lashes flutter closed, parts his lips part on a breathless, wanting sigh. In the last split-second before everything goes dark and warm, he sees Hannibal's pitch-black pupils boring black holes into Will's soul. It's all Will needs to know that he's all Hannibal can see, and he'd sooner die than look away.

He sinks his teeth into his lower lip. Cracks his eyes open to pin Hannibal in place, keep him trapped in this fire-lit seduction. It's too late for him to run. Will wonders if Hannibal ever thought to try.

"Baby, I want what I've wanted since I got here. It hasn't changed," Will says, soft and imploring. Nudges his nose against Hannibal's cheek. Blinks, nice and slow and saccharine sweet. "Get undressed. Fuck me."

Will can see the moment the full force of the words strike him. His lips part. A tightening and subsequent softening around his eyes, a quick flutter of lashes, but otherwise his expression doesn't change. But Will can see the monster behind the red of his irises, can see it pause, gentle its claws. Can see it hesitate, calculate, despite its own rampant want—searching for a snare.

Oh, Will wants him tangled so thoroughly he can never get free. But there's no good in it if Hannibal's aware. So he laps at Hannibal's mouth, traces the line of his teeth. Tempts him until he relents and kisses Will in return, sucks on his searching tongue and circles his hole and Will *moans.*

"We need lubrication," Hannibal says as he leans back.

Will chases him forward, climbs him, arms around Hannibal's neck and cock pressed between their bellies. He shudders at the friction. Twines one hand in Hannibal's hair, and whispers against his mouth, "So get me wet."

Hannibal's pupils blow wide. He stares up at Will like he's not quite sure he's ever seen him before. "I'm starting to think that might take me too long to satisfy you."

Will huffs through his nose, even as his lips spread on a smile. "Won't know until you try."

Hannibal rolls his head back, casts a long look at Will from beneath his lashes. Touches his cheek with his knuckles. Slips them down over Will's throat, his collar bones. Rubs idly around one nipple, pink and pert. He licks his lips when Will presses up into it, into the pinpricks of electricity that sparks across his skin.

Hannibal's eyes are heavy-lidded, mouth red. He looks famished.

"Look at you," he murmurs. "Exquisite, gorgeous creature that you are." He thumbs over Will's chest, rolls the nub beneath the blunt edge of his nail until Will gasps, until it's hard and flushed and Will's cock is twitching between them.

"Here's what I'll do, and I'm afraid it's the best I can offer: let me up—" Will growls low in his throat. Hannibal's eyes darken, and he digs his nail in just hard enough to shock, to *hurt,* and. *Fuck.* "Darling, let me finish."

Will swallows. Tugs at Hannibal's hair in recompense, but nods.

"Let me up," Hannibal repeats. "If you won't allow me to bring you to bed, at least let me get some oil from the kitchen to ease the process—not so unlike the Greeks. I promise to be swift. I have no desire to leave you wanting, and when I return, I'll give you everything you demand." He pauses. Licks his lips. "But if I take too long, you have my permission to hunt me down, and I will make it up to you however you see fit. Agreed?"

Wilhelmina tilts her head, an animal gesture, and Will echoes her. They survey their mate, his tousled hair, his sharp and predatory gaze. They don't find him lacking.

Will lifts himself on his knees, puts one foot on the floor and swings the other over Hannibal. There's a damp spot at the bulge in the front of Hannibal's slacks. It's impossible to know which of them caused it, but the thought of them ruining more than one pair of pants in their desire and haste makes Will's gut clench.

He takes a step back. Takes a breath. Presses the heel of his hand to his cock and hisses the exhale through his teeth. "Fine. Go. *But."*

Hannibal pauses in his standing, then slowly lifts himself to his feet. His attention doesn't waver.

The warmth of the fire at Will's back is comforting. Emboldening. Outside this room, he has to be civil in a way he doesn't within these walls. This room seems oddly suited to upsets of stature and fits of unreality, and Will embraces that—lets the power of it lift his head and strengthen the set of his chin, to roll back his shoulders and stand like Wilhelmina would stand: all long, pale limbs and no concern for how anyone finds the state of this body they share. Like perhaps they don't even inhabit it at all, but wear it like a shroud, draping in a gradient of opacity to iridescence over the creature they are within. Right now, the fabric is thin, and both their identities and their lies are close to the surface.

“I was patient when you said we had to stop. I didn’t whine or beg. I thought about it. I was good because this day was important to you. And it’s been fantastic, Hannibal. It was worth it.” Will glances at the fireplace, then Hannibal’s desk, where even now their empty mugs ringed with the dregs of sweet red wine make the surface less than immaculate. It’s noticeably altered by their presence, by Will’s. He steps around Hannibal. Returns to the couch. Sits, feet planted on the floor. Stares up at Hannibal, towering above, and savors the feel of the upholstery against his bare body as he slowly reclines. “But the nights I’ve had with you in this room are important to *me.* I don’t want to chase you anywhere else. I want to have you *here.* And I will, one way or another.”

Will scritches his nails over the cushion below him. Lifts his head, and spreads his arms wide over the back of the couch. Preens. Displays himself. And in this moment, it doesn’t matter that he is naked and aroused, that there is starting stubble on his jaw, that he is bare of the clear outlines that makeup and lingerie, or that even Hannibal’s clothing gives him. He feels *good.* He feels *powerful.*

“But if you make me wait, I’ll make you beg.”

A muscle in Hannibal’s jaw twitches. The veins in his neck seem to stand out more than they did before. If Will’s head is lifted in pride, Hannibal’s chin is lowered as he poises himself like a beast about to attack. And as Will lifts one hand from the back of the couch, Hannibal’s eyes snap to it—to the lazy, flippant gesture toward the doorway Will gives him with a matching, challenging gaze.

“Go on. I’m waiting.”

Will maintains that air of indifference, but Wilhelmina is *raptly* at attention with the way he moves—stalks away in total silence, poised on the balls of his feet in long, gliding steps. A man, a hunter, and a hunter of men. A predator in his prime.

And he belongs to Will.

Will exhales hard. He tips his head back against the couch and lets his eyes flutter closed. Slouches. Licks his lips, and pinches roughly at the nipple Hannibal toyed with; switches to the other until it’s similarly alight with abuse and his heart is pounding within his ribs. Spreads his legs and slips his other hand between them, palms his cock and spreads the dripping, persistent wetness from the head of his shaft to the base. He trails damp fingers down over his balls and touches his entrance, and he’s not nearly wet enough to push inside, but it’s so *good.*

His fingers aren’t as thick as Hannibal’s; they don’t feel the same, don’t carry the same weight and heft and texture, but it doesn’t stop Will’s cock from jerking helplessly against his abdomen, doesn’t stop the starbursts of sensation across his chest that burn behind his eyelids. Will leaves his cock largely ignored, pinching and tugging and twisting cruelly until his nipples feel hot and sore. God, his dick aches, and what the hell is taking so *long*—

The sound of fabric forces Will’s eyes open, and when they do, it’s to the sight of Hannibal pushing his pants over his hips and letting them fall, underwear similarly discarded. He steps out of them. Kicks them aside. Holds Will’s eyes, dark and curious and lit from inside with hellfire. Just the tilt of his chin is a silent challenge; a quirk of his eyebrow says *quick enough?* though Hannibal himself does not. Instead, his gaze is rapt on Will’s chest, the deep pink flush of his areolas. He reaches past Will and sets something on the table behind him: a tall, slender glass cylinder with a pour-spout nozzle, Just the sight of it shoots electricity down his spine.

And then he reaches for Will; catches one flushed nub between his fingers and applies pressure. It’s not enough to hurt—at least until it does, and Will’s lips part on a helpless, oversensitized gasp. He

feels that pinch in his sternum, in his gut, like Hannibal has a direct line to his balls, and the gasp fades into a whine.

And then he lets go. Will stares up at him; desperation fuels annoyance fuels anger, and he bares his teeth. Hannibal observes, a scientist watching an insect. It's all but unacceptable.

Will hisses. Pushes himself up off the couch, onto his feet, and into Hannibal's space. He cups Hannibal's cheeks tenderly in his palms, but is indelicate with the subtle bite of his nails. Will leans in close, lips parted, just to see the satisfied flash in Hannibal's eyes before—

Will turns them abruptly. His hands drop to Hannibal's shoulders pushing him onto the couch with some amount of force. He bounces as he hits the cushions; huffs as his back hits the backrest. Hannibal looks stunned by it, and then irritated, on a knife's edge of temper and violence—at least, until Will climbs into his lap. Straddles him, drops his weight and *grinds;* moans so sweetly at the harsh drag of their cocks together. Slides one hand into Hannibal's hair. Kisses him, lewd and wet.

And Hannibal doesn't complain after that.

He hums his appreciation against Will's teeth and tongue; reaches back blindly for the oil spout and pours it into his cupped palm. It's both a shock and a minor disappointment that he doesn't immediately finger Will open, but the slick clutch of Hannibal's palm around their shafts is a more than suitable consolation prize. Will gasps when a sharp roll of his hips brings the head of his cock into contact with Hannibal's abdomen, the slight scratch of the hair there. Fuck, it's so—*he's* so—

Will cups the nape of Hannibal's neck. Leans in and touches their foreheads together. Pushes his own legs wider on the couch cushion until his muscles protest the strain. "You said you wouldn't make me wait."

A dark glimmer of amusement. "Are you so eager to have me fuck you?"

The wounded sound that pushes out of Will's lungs is not quite a moan. It's something more visceral, more raw, at hearing Hannibal's mouth curl around such vulgar words, steeped in casual disregard for Will's sanity. And he has never looked so delighted to hear Will so affected.

Will fucks into his fist, eyes heavy and half-lidded, heart beating a bass-filled rhythm inside his ribs. It times with the dull, distant pulse of arousal clawing at his gut. "You know I am."

"I'm curious," Hannibal growls. "Would you have let me taken you with your back against the front door?"

"Yes," Will pants against his mouth. Rolls his hips, drops his head back to expose his throat. "Fuck, Hannibal, I still would."

Hannibal takes the opening he's given; tightens the grip of his fingers to make Will whimper. Sets his teeth to Will's throat and slowly, gently closes them to make Will gasp, whine, keen.

He is in the jaws of a carnivore—but Will is not prey. His lashes flutter closed, and he hopes Hannibal feels it in his bones when he says, perhaps too honestly, "I would do anything for you."

Hannibal twists his wrist, jacks slick and wet to the base of Will's cock and back up. Palms the head, rubs his balls, slips his hand behind to press his fingers firmly to the flat, sensitive stretch of skin there. At the stutter of Will's breath, he relents the grip of his teeth. Licks over the imprints, though with reverence rather than apology. "*Anything* is a great deal to promise."

Will clutches at him, tugs at his hair. Pets through it. Cradles the nape of his neck to keep Hannibal close. “I mean it.” He swallows hard, and his mouth drops open on a moan as he wriggles in place, ruts his cock against Hannibal’s belly and grinds back onto Hannibal’s beneath him. “Oh, *God.* I mean it. I would.”

The pads of Hannibal’s fingertips ghost over his entrance, then retreat. Hannibal lifts his head with a savage motion, eyes bright and teeth exposed by his curled lip and panting breaths as he reaches for the oil again. It drips from his fingers, thick and viscous, gleaming gold in the light. Will wonders if this was what it felt like, to be laid upon the altar of an old god as a willing sacrifice. The scent of olives and the crackle of flames, the slick of sweat upon fevered skin.

“Jesus,” Will whispers, and his gut clenches with fierce arousal, persistent want. “We’re gonna ruin this couch.”

“You insisted on having me here,” Hannibal growls. “I would have brought you to bed.” He loops his arm around Will’s lower back and hauls him up onto his knees. Unlike last time, the distant suggestion of an objection does not cause him to stop. He’s either further gone than he appears, learning Will’s tells better, or both. Will finds that viciously pleasing, and more pleasing still as Hannibal gets him wet with a quick, merciless brush of his hand from perineum to Will’s clenching hole. Curls his fingers. Presses one slowly inside, rotates his wrist for a better angle as Will twitches at the intrusion. God, it feels different when he can’t see it and doesn’t know what to expect. He tucks his face into Hannibal’s throat with a quiet, overwhelmed moan.

Out. In. Will gasps breathless little sounds at each until the oil is adequately spread, until the glide gets easier, smoother. Until he can rock back against Hannibal’s controlling grip around his waist, and his huffs of being oversensitized turn to quiet little grumbles of frustration. Hannibal’s finger slips along the soft walls of his insides, searches for—

He changes tactics. Removes it, and before Will can complain, he is ceaselessly working two back inside. Forces Will’s body to yield to his fingertips, the ridges of his knuckles, all the way to the base. Drags out, pushes in, and the momentum of his arm rocks Will’s body with him.

*“Mm*mm,” Will moans from behind clenched teeth and closed lips, brightens and gains force and he murmurs, “Hannibal, *fuck.”*

“Is that good, darling?”

Will nods, eyes clenched closed. One hand tightens in Hannibal’s hair, holds on for dear life. The other frantically worms its way between their bodies, their stomachs, until Will can get his fingers wrapped around Hannibal’s cock. His palm is barely slick anymore, probably too dry, but Hannibal is uncut and wet enough that Will can make due with short, harsh pulls and the way Hannibal himself is dripping. Will mimics the force of Hannibal’s fingers in his body. Makes it impossible for him to ignore what it would feel like to have his cock in Will’s ass if he would just *hurry the fuck up.*

Hannibal snarls breathlessly, presses his cheek against Will’s throat; but pulling away enough to bite would mean disengaging from this tug-of-war of sexual gratification. Will’s sure he doesn’t mean to give in, though no matter how it ends, neither of them will really *lose.*

Hannibal works his fingers apart, stretching and tugging at Will’s rim, and Will clenches *hard* at the feeling of being open, of knowing Hannibal’s made him that way with each rock of Will’s body back against him. That he’s being pushed and prodded and pleasured by hands that have ended lives, marked by sharp teeth that have torn through the flesh of lesser men. It hits him like a flash between the eyes, like a punch to the gut.

All the things the Ripper could do to him, could have *done* to him, and *this* is where they ended up.

Will's motions slow. His hand stills, and even his twitching body takes a moment of respite. His fingers in Hannibal's hair relax. Gentle. Smooth through. "Hey," Will murmurs, and paws at Hannibal's neck, his back, anything within reach. "Hey. Hannibal, mm. Hang on."

Hannibal yields; it takes some effort, but Will untangles himself and leans back enough to look him in the eyes. The loss of his fingers leaves him aching and empty. Will intends to be full soon enough, but…

There's a wildness to Hannibal's gaze. His arm around Will's waist remains; looser now, but just as possessive. "Is it too much?"

Will shakes his head. "No, no. I…" His flanks and cock twitch; muscles in his back spasm. "I'm ready, but I…" He grimaces. His back and legs are tight and sore, trembling minutely from being forcibly held up by Hannibal's monstrous strength. Will sits back on his heels, strain taken off his thighs, and sighs his relief. Leans in. Kisses Hannibal's shoulder chastely in gentle thanks. Between them, he resumes his coddling of Hannibal's cock, leisurely and slow. Smiles when Hannibal's jaw clenches, his lashes flutter, and Will leans in to kiss him.

A meeting of lips. A taste of tongues. Hannibal is the one to break it with bright and curious eyes. The arm around Will's waist drops, pets at his back instead. He tilts his head in silent inquiry. In Hannibal's expression is desire, affection, the barest edge of frustration. In some way, it's good to know he's human beneath the frighteningly controlled facade he wears.

Will's hand at his neck slips free; threads his fingers into Hannibal's tousled bangs and brushes them out of his eyes. Keeps this scant distance, if only so he can watch the changes that overtake him one at a time. Will kisses the corner of Hannibal's mouth, and touches their foreheads together. His lashes lower. The space between them is dark and warm. Intimate. "I want to see you."

It's a rare thing to see Hannibal surprised. It doesn't show in the usual ways. His eyes aren't wide; aside from the sex flush on his cheeks and nose, he doesn't get flustered. But there's a distinct pause that's visible to those who know how to look. His attention flickers between Will's eyes, assessing his honesty before he concedes with a nod. But a concession would indicate some sort of compromise. It's likely how he wants it to appear, given how prone Hannibal is to hide the things he wants for himself. But in reality, there's a glimmer in his eyes that tells the truth: Hannibal accepting Will's words as a gift, starved for sensory input as he is. "Then you shall."

Will nods back. Settles with warmth. Burns with pride. Smiles, small and fierce. "Stay still."

Will lifts himself on his knees, slips his fist up Hannibal's cock as he lines himself up. His lips fall open, teeth exposed on a sharp, overwhelmed cry as the head slips in and he sinks down until he's fully seated.

Hannibal *moans.* He clutches at Will's hips. Doesn't try to move him, but his fingers dig in hard enough to leave pale imprints of his touch and turn his knuckles white. *"Oh."*

It stings a little, but *fuck,* the fullness is incredible. Indescribable. *God,* if he'd thought being fucked on his back got him good, then just *this*—

Hannibal's cock twitches inside him, and Will's head drops back, lifts his face to the heavens like a prayer for mercy because fuck, *fuck,* he wants to move. Wants to figure this out and make it even

better. Will clenches unintentionally, but knows its effect from the bite of Hannibal's nails into his hips and thighs. His whispered, pained, *"Will."*

"Mmm, fuck," Will murmurs. "Can I move?"

Nothing, for a moment, but the sounds of the fire and the deliberate quiet of Hannibal's breathing. Then, *"Yes."*

Will rolls his hips and whimpers; immediately spreads his knees further to gain better leverage and each minute flex of his thighs allows him to move himself on Hannibal's cock. Lift and fall, and the harsh shove into his slick body and the sound of his ass meeting Hannibal's lap is—

"Shit," Will gasps, and barks a laugh to the ceiling, and fuck he's so *full.* Grinds down *hard* until it almost hurts, until Hannibal's balls are snug against his ass and, "Oh. Oh, god, oh *fuck—!"*

Hannibal thrusts up, his gaze dark and glittering as Will snaps to look at him, wide-eyed and helpless, stretched and fucked full. Will rolls with him like a boat on the tide, flutters and twitches as it grinds the head of Hannibal's cock so fucking deep, and—

Will presses their foreheads together again. Claws at Hannibal's shoulder for balance and purchase as he rises and falls, as they find a rhythm that's so filthy and *good* that both their mouths hang open. That they pant each other's air. That Hannibal's pupils are blown so black that there's no red left, and Wilhemina has no words to whisper when neither she nor Will can catch their breath. He's filled so deeply, so completely, that it feels he can't fully expand his lungs. That Hannibal never leaves him more than halfway before Will is pushing himself back down, selfish and greedy for everything Hannibal can give him.

Hannibal's veins bunch and flex in his arms with the strength he uses to fuck Will on his cock, to lift and drop him, pressing and holding and shifting and moving him this way and that. Curling his fingers around Will's hip bones and holding him fast, until there's no lift at all but just a slow, painfully, *achingly* deep grind.

"Fuck," Will whispers against his lips. "Hannibal. Fuck, baby. I can *feel—"* Will clenches and gasps for breath; snaps one hand to Hannibal's and drags it up. Presses it flat below his navel and pushes *in* until it hurts, but where each upward roll is distinct and tangible, Will's internal muscles being forced apart to make room for the home Hannibal is carving himself inside.

Hannibal twitches *hard.* He looks *ruined.* Gutted. Breaks their eye contact to stare at Will's flat belly, to push just a little harder until it's concave to feel, *feel*—"Does it hurt?" he whispers breathlessly.

Will licks his lips; bares his teeth in a pained but pleasured grimace, and his lashes flutter. Hannibal looks up, and Will nods. "Yeah, but I. I like it."

"Will," he moans. "Beloved thing, you *unmake* me. Do you know that?" A vein in Hannibal's temple, in his jaw, in his throat visibly throbs, and both inside and outside the wet sheath of Will's body, he trembles.

Will's jaws part on a sharp, fierce laugh. His arms encircle Hannibal's neck, thread into his hair. Holds him close and hot and tight until all Will can see is his face. Doesn't want to see anything else. "That's what I want," he mutters, and leans forward to nip hard at Hannibal's mouth. Laps at the seam of his lips until he opens for breath, until he can lick at Hannibal's tongue in languid presses in the open air. Grinds again. This time, tighter and hotter and harder as the sensation of Hannibal's fingers against his belly sets him higher. As the friction gains heat, and his arousal becomes urgent.

Will pulls Hannibal forward and frees his arms; braces himself on the back of the couch for better leverage. The heat in his core is molten, aching for fulfillment, and Will is reduced to impulse. Instinct. Until he's not Will at all, and not Wilhelmina either. Just pure, raw need—an exposed nerve, a synapse sparking and spiraling his whole body into chaos.

Will's eyes narrow. His lip curls into a snarl, bared teeth. A growl starts low in Will's chest as he rolls his hips, his *body,* in a fluid undulation that is purely and selfishly in search of his own pleasure. He lifts himself free and drops himself on Hannibal's cock; does it hard enough it makes his guts shudder and cramp, but *god,* it's nothing but fucking fantastic. He doesn't know or care if it hurts Hannibal, too. He's chasing a high, chaining lightning one strike after another in the hopes the surge will light him up and blow him out.

"Come on," Will snaps to Hannibal's pitch-black gaze, to the monster just below the surface that stares at him in naked, undisguised desire and wonder. "Come on, come *on. Fuck me."*

"Will—"

Will's merciless; it should be enough to get him killed, but it's not, because nothing ever is. In this moment, his own monster is taking terrible advantage of that knowledge. He winds his hand into Hannibal's hair and doesn't tug, but *pulls.* "Like you *mean it,* Hannibal. Like you *want to,* I know you do*."*

One prowling horror just wasn't enough. Then there were two.

Hannibal grabs him by the hips. The veil over his eyes is drawn back, and the yawning darkness inside him spies its mate. It claws furrows into Will's skin as it drags him back onto its cock. It fucks him deeply, snaps its hips and its jaws, overcome by the instinct to breed. Will snarls and pushes off the back of the couch; digs his nails into Hannibal's chest for just long enough to pull off of him, to get his legs around Hannibal's waist and be dropped back onto the thick, burning heat of his shaft. Hannibal's chin hooks over his shoulder. His arms wind around Will with a constrictor's grip. Will's arms encircle around Hannibal's neck and gnashes his teeth, hidden in Hannibal's shoulder as he desperately, frantically ruts against him in search of his orgasm, that bright light building inside him, behind his eyes, burning through his limbs and smarting in his fingertips, *howling* when Hannibal's nails rake down his back as Will grinds against the dips and ridges and sparse hair on his belly, as the head of his cock catches on Hannibal's navel—

Will bites into Hannibal's shoulder until he tastes blood; cries and keens as his orgasm crushes him and drags him under, overtakes his vision and his body until he's not sure whether this pleasure and pain is from coming harder than he ever has in his *life,* or—

"Mine," Hannibal snarls, sinks his teeth in just shy of Will's hairline; holds Will's life in his jaws as he fucks him through orgasm and pushes *deep* and *hard* and *hot* and goes still.

Will's not sure where his mind goes. Only that he floats on a gossamer haze of endorphins and Hannibal's body heat, and he's not even sure he's conscious until he feels the distinctly horrifying and arousing sensation of teeth pulling out of his flesh. Blood dripping down his neck. Hannibal's cock pulling out of him. Hannibal cursing *vehemently* in a tone that is unmistakable but a language that is not English. Will is weightless and unconcerned as he's shuffled in Hannibal's arms, and as an unidentifiable mass of fabric is pressed somewhere between his ear and his spine, shy of any major blood vessels, but a place that'll bleed like a stuck pig all the same.

He doesn't care. Because for one fucking second, Wilhelmina is quiet, Will is *owned,* and before he has to worry about it, he wants to enjoy this.

“Darling,” Hannibal says softly, urgently, and Will feels his fingertips prodding at the other side of Will’s throat—feeling for his pulse, while simultaneously wrapping his throat with fabric. Hannibal’s shirt, if the scent is anything to go by. “Will. Are you alright?”

Will paws blindly for Hannibal’s hand at his pulse and twines their fingers together. Brings them close. Tucks both between their chests, then laps at the sluggishly welling beads of blood that rise on Hannibal’s skin that he seems not to have noticed. They smear over Will’s mouth and coat his tongue with the taste of iron.

“I love you,” Will mutters affectionately. Then disparagingly, “You’re ruining my glow.”

Hannibal sighs. The sound is one of expectant but pleased relief. “How very rude of me.” Naked affection, as he pets from the crown of Will’s head to the uninjured back of his neck. “I’m afraid I… bit you rather hard.”

“Needs stitches?” Will asks. Shifts uncomfortably at the disgustingly satisfying sensation of come leaking from his body.

“No,” Hannibal replies. “But a bandage and some antiseptic wouldn’t be remiss.”

“Too many words,” Will complains. Cracks open his eyes only the barest amount possible to see Hannibal’s silhouette. “Can it wait?”

A soft, amused huff. “Perhaps for a little while.”

Will nods, accepting and exhausted in equal measures. And satisfied, in a measure unequal to either. Far exceeding. “Good. Then rest. I wanna enjoy this.”

That, at least, seems to brighten Hannibal’s mood. He pets down Will’s spine, cautious of the wrapping over Will’s throat. “Alright.” Then, nudging Will’s side gently, “Hold on to me.”

Like Will planned on anything different. Still, he nods, then winces as the slight stretch makes his neck twinge. Cuddles in as Hannibal leans forward, turns sideways on the couch, and lies down. Will kisses the gentle thud of his pulse, and when Hannibal’s palms brush over his back, it aches. And it’s so *good* that he arches into it. Lifts his chin, noses up the side of Hannibal’s throat until they’re level. Climbs onto Hannibal’s chest and kisses him, slow and soft and sweet.

“Sorry about your couch,” Will whispers.

For a moment, Hannibal just breathes. Then he huffs the laugh Will expected from him. Clutches at anything of Will he can reach. Noses at the soft planes of his face like something wild but affectionate. “Quite unavoidable. It needed reupholstering.”

“Maybe get a couch cover,” Will murmurs. “For next time.”

Hannibal searches for Will’s lips with his own. Pauses. Licks them, and savors the taste of blood clinging stubbornly between them. It’s his own.

He smiles at Will, and Will can honestly say he’s never seen Hannibal look quite so happy before. “I’ll be sure to keep that in mind.”

Will lies sprawled over Hannibal's chest for longer than is medically advisable. In actuality, they should have gone to bed almost an hour ago, but the sated glow and the fire's warmth lulled them both into complacency. The ebb and flow of Hannibal's breath kept Will rising and falling with the natural tides of his body, and he's loathe to part himself from it until even Hannibal's heat surrounding him can't stave off the chill.

The walk upstairs is… sticky. Uncomfortable. But *God,* it's worth it, if only to see the gleam in Hannibal's shadowed eyes in the dark, his possessive hand on Will's scratched back—and the way his slow stride falters for a half-second when he realizes where Will is leading him. He waits until Will has started the water and has stripped the tourniquet of Hannibal's shirt from his throat, until Will''s standing beneath the stream and staring expectantly back to actually step into the shower with him. It's not like there isn't enough room, ridiculously opulent walk-in that it is. But the fact that he waits, the fact that he makes sure Will is certain, even in the aftermath of their complete possession of one another is… enthralling.

It doesn't speak to hesitance. Rather, a beacon of respect. Laying aside assumption to follow Will's wants, Will's desires. But Will desires him always, and so when Hannibal's arms encircle his waist and he laps the rolling beads of water from his neck, the smudges of blood from his wound, the pleasure of simply having him near is intoxicating. He's content to let Hannibal hold him, to let Hannibal's control him in the face of his own laziness, but…

God, Hannibal's hands in his hair are exquisite. The way he chuckles when Will melts feels like adoration incarnate. "When was the last time anyone did this for you, mylimasis?"

"When I was like, four," Will murmurs as he tips his head back ito Hannibal's palms. "Before my dad cut my hair. And it didn't feel like this."

"Why did you cut it?"

"To say I cut it would imply I had any choice in the matter," he replies wryly. "Because it was summer in the deep south, and it wasn't right for a boy's hair to touch his shoulders in the Bible Belt. By the time I was twelve and he knew I meant it, my dad didn't have the heart to see me cry about it anymore. It got better after that."

"The cavalier way many that adults treat young children as possessions rather than people has never quite sat right with me," Hannibal says. "I always felt I was better at listening to my sister than my parents were. Perhaps that was part of the time. But perhaps that's the reason they often left her in my care. She was much happier that way."

Will's breath stalls in his chest. "You have a sister?"

Hannibal, too, is silent. For a moment, his hands go still. Then, with a soft sigh, he resumes the sensual massage, concentric circles scritched against Will's scalp. "I did."

The implication is unmistakable. Those two simple words carry such shuttered emotion that it slices Will deeply. They bear the burden of Hannibal's deep affection, his savage brand of love. In that moment, there is an understanding that cements itself in the darkest places of Will's mind, a shared connection in the loss of the only family that could ever anchor them. In this, they are the same.

"What was her name?" Will asks.

The sound of the water hitting the tile is reminiscent of echoing rain. He moves when Hannibal moves him, places him beneath the stream to wash the suds away. They sting his neck as they spiral down his body and down the drain. The water in his ears nearly drowns Hannibal's voice in the deluge, but he feels it against his back where they are pressed together. Feels it in his spine, his ribs, his heart.

"Mischa."

Will's hair is plastered to his scalp. It sticks to his neck and shoulder blades in sodden strands as he turns in Hannibal's arms. Will touches his cheeks, pushes his hands back into Hannibal's hair, and is pinned by a flat and dangerously dead stare. A silent warning.

Any pity here will be furiously rejected. Will dampen Hannibal's regard for him, even if he doesn't mean it to. But fortunately, Will has no intention of pitying Hannibal. One cannot pity someone they understand from cells to soul.

Will doesn't move. Sets his jaw. Tilts his head, and his gaze dips to Hannibal's mouth. "How old was she?"

Hannibal's lip curls, a flicker of a snarl before he's unreadable again. Will wonders if he knows how silly it is to hide from him when he's wearing the imprint of Will's teeth. "Does it matter?"

Water drips from his lashes, but Will's eyes are clear. Licks his lips. "My dad was forty."

It's not what Hannibal expects him to say—Will can tell that much immediately. It startles light back into his eyes, his expression into a frown. He looks down at Will; his quiet, peaceful expression. The bite that's just far enough back that Will himself can't see it. It's solely for Hannibal. And that seems to soothe him, as much as Will's about-face disrupted him. "That's very young to have suffered a heart attack."

Hannibal remembers. It shouldn't surprise Will that he does, but it does. He takes a breath. Holds it. Releases it, and rubs his thumb over the nape of Hannibal's neck. Lower. Traces around the set of symmetrical punctures left on Hannibal's shoulder. They're low enough to be hidden beneath a collared shirt, beneath scrubs. Will already knows there'll be no hiding Hannibal's mark on him.

But it's all by design. The less Hannibal believes he's given, the more he's apt to give. The secret he hopes to hold about Mischa's age tells Will all he needs to know: *too young.*

Will says softly, pointedly, "Does it matter?"

Hannibal's quiet for a time while he absorbs this. At long last, he leans down and touches their foreheads together. A slow blink, a gentle and considering gaze. His arms encircle Will's waist. Their bodies touch. Drenched in hot water, Hannibal is warmer still. His lips touch Will's cheek and his voice is so soft when he admits, "Maybe it does."

The world outside the shower feels too empty, too cold. Will sticks close to Hannibal's side after they're both appropriately bandaged and as they exit into his bedroom. They keep the lights off. It does not, Will notices, feel too dark. Even with the dim light that comes in through the curtains, he can see perfectly well.

Will's bag sits on Hannibal's bed. It's laughably out of place, but Will hardly notices anymore. He hesitates only between the pairs of underwear he packed. Assesses exactly what he feels in this moment. Who he is.

He takes out the black lace and pulls them up over his prickly calves, his smooth thighs, but tonight, he doesn't feel any different.

In the morning, he'll shave again. Shed the skin he's worn this evening as he puts his makeup on. He's bared more of his heart today than he's intended, but it doesn't feel like a mistake. A new support structure is building in this bridge between them. High masts. Steel cables. Something impressive that will cease being the shadow of an overpass, and instead become a fixture to weather the ages. Bear any load.

"Will," Hannibal says from the mouth of the closet. His eyes linger on Will's underwear for only a moment. He doesn't quite smile, but in his eyes is a clear contentment and peace as he holds out his hand. "Come here a moment."

He’s pulled on a pair of sleep pants; it leaves he and Will in similar but unequal states of undress. His hair is tousled and thick, falling into his eyes; Will’s, loose and wet, but no longer dripping. A mess, surely, but Will’s not worried or self-conscious. He squeezes Hannibal’s hand, tilts his head in silent inquiry.

Hannibal squeezes back. His eyes drop to the tangle of their fingers; he raises them to his mouth and presses a kiss to Will’s knuckles. “I have something for you.”

Will’s lips part on a sigh. “Hannibal…”

A wry smile. A glint of dark, private amusement. “I’ll break you yet of your resistance to gifts, beloved. But this one I’m quite sure you’ll like.”

Will huffs to deflect from the pleased warmth that rises in his cheeks. Raises a brow. “Oh, you’re sure?”

“Quite, yes.” Hannibal takes an opaque garment bag from the closet; turns the head of the hanger and hooks it over the bar, the seam facing them. “After all, it rightfully already belongs to you.”

Whatever sardonic remark he’d been ready to return dies before it leaves his mouth. Instead, Will freezes. His heart thuds painfully in his chest with something he doesn’t even dare call hope. Whispers, “What?”

Hannibal inclines his head. That smile fades into an intimate attentiveness as he locks eyes with Will. Squeezes his hand, and then lets him go. Holds the plastic still as he unzips the bag and—

Will’s breath escapes him in the form of an unsteady, punched-out sigh. He can’t stop himself from reaching for it, pulling it off the hanger, bringing it to his face and inhaling the scent of hunter-green canvas. Clean; purged of blood.

“I know I promised you a new coat to replace the one I loaned you, and I still have every intention of doing so. But I knew you’d appreciate this one more.” Hannibal murmurs. His hand spreads wide and warm across Will’s bare back, hot and stinging with scratches. “Today is a day for family. Selfishly, I’m thankful for the tragedies you’ve suffered that brought you into my path. That includes being thankful for your father, and the many ways his life and death have served all that you’ve become.”

Will’s fingers clutch so tightly that it hurts. His heart pounds. He curls around the jacket like a child with a security blanket—but that’s what this had been for him, hasn’t it? The blanket of his father’s influence to shield him from the world. Meeting Hannibal had stripped him of that.

And now his monster has given it back.

It’s a keen ploy. A gift like this would have given Hannibal the opportunity to always and forever tie his memory to an object that Will would never reasonably part with; a touchstone as interwoven with his influence as inexorably as it’s tied to Beau Graham’s.

But.

Hannibal didn’t have to do it. He could have let this go. Tossed the coat in the trash with no one the wiser. He could have let Will forget, let Will be wrapped up in all Hannibal has given him, until nothing else remains but pieces of Will that have been colored by the blood Hannibal has shed in his name.

The Ripper is a selfish creature. He accepts no false idols. No distractions. No exceptions.

Except… he did.

Which means this is not an act of selfishness. Instead, against Will's snap judgement of the Ripper's character… it's an act of kindness. One treasured, lost thing returned to Will's possession, plucked from a veritable laundry list of things Will stands to lose should this affair go belly-up.

Will lifts his face from the fabric, though he holds it just as protectively as he turns into Hannibal's arms with the coat pinned between them. Rests his cheek on Hannibal's shoulder atop the bandage of his bite, and closes his eyes at the feeling of being held. Being supported. Being adored. Being loved. "His name was Beau."

Hannibal strokes his hair, his neck. His fingers wander and trace the very edge of the medical tape, an inch behind Will's left ear, to the terminus just shy of his vertebrae. Rests his chin atop Will's head. After a long and aching silence, he says, "She was four, my Mischa."

Will flinches. Buries his face in Hannibal's throat. Suspicions confirmed. "Just a baby."

"Yes, she was." Hannibal sighs. Rubs Will's back. "She was."

Will gorges himself on this feeling—sad and full and melancholy and content. Presses a fleeting kiss to Hannibal's carotid, then down to the pillow of non stick gauze. Kisses the very edge of it, and sighs warmly through his nose. "Hannibal."

"Mm?"

"Thank you." Will swallows hard. Exhales. Tightens his hands around his gift. "Thank you."

"Of course, mylimasis. It was the least I could do." He lifts his chin and presses a kiss to Will's damp hair. Loving. Possessive. Both of which, only for Will. "Shall we go to bed?"

Will nods and nuzzles under the curve of Hannibal's jaw. "Let me hang this up. I'll be right there."

With one last unsubtle pet from the crown of his head to the base of his spine, Hannibal goes. Will holds the jacket for just a moment longer. Ducks his head to it, rubs his cheek against it. It's such a simple thing, this comfort. It's nice to have a simple thing.

The love he feels isn't simple—but it's better that way.

Will hangs up the coat. Turns, at the sound of sheets and blankets being folded down, then Hannibal's padding footsteps to adjust the bedroom temperature at the wall thermostat. "I had meant to ask you earlier, Will. There's another benefit coming up in December, right around the Christmas holidays for the hospital. If the last gala was not too much of an ordeal—"

"Yes."

Hannibal stills. Resumes. "I understand."

Will huffs incredulously. All this time, and Hannibal still seems to be underestimating him. It's almost unbelievable, but then again, it stands to reason that his pride might be his downfall, were Will not aware of it. Were Will not doing his damndest to get ahead of it.

Will goes to the bed. Climbs beneath the blankets, just in time to savor the feel of Hannibal's eyes on his ass, more tangible than his lace underwear. Turns on his side, facing Hannibal. Nestles in, careless as Hannibal watches him, and lowers his lashes in a slow, fond smile. "I meant yes, I want to go."

He blinks. The light starts first in his eyes, then spreads to the slight upward tilt of his lips, the incline of his head as he looks at Will in his bed, proud predator presiding. “I have one requirement.”

Oh, this’ll be good. “Name it.”

Hannibal prowls to the mattress, crawls over the edge and over Will and hovers when Will lands solidly on his back. Leans down to brush their noses together, to kiss him deeply in a meeting of lips and tongues that tastes like mint. “You’ll let me purchase your outfit for you. We’ll choose together. You may prepare for the evening with Miss Verger as you please, but you won’t wear any of her hand-me-downs.”

Will barks a laugh against his mouth. “Seriously?”

“I’m very serious.”

“It’s ridiculous to spend that much money on something you only wear once.”

“Then you may donate it afterward if it pleases you, so that it might be worn again. But being personally present for the selection and responsible for its purchase are my only stipulations.”

Will sighs. Hovering over him, Hannibal looks incredibly pleased with himself and unfortunately, roguishly handsome in doing so. “I’m not gonna get out of it, am I?”

“No.” He touches the tip of his nose to Will’s cheek, his mouth to the corner of Will’s mouth. “I don’t care whether you choose a suit or a gown. But I want to be there to help you smooth wrinkles from your clothing, fasten buttons and zippers. I want to see you as you select your armor for battle against my colleagues and supervisors and subordinates. I want to experience you out of your natural element, making yourself adaptable to my circumstances.” He turns his head. Kisses Will’s lips. “I want to spoil you. And I want you to consent to let me.”

Will huffs. Reaches up with a frown and threads his fingers into Hannibal’s hair. Waits until the set of his arms soften, until he leans into the touch—

Will shoves up, topples them onto their sides. Grapples Hannibal down, which he only accomplishes by the element of surprise. Pins him by the shoulders, and takes in the fire in his gaze. Grins, as he hovers over Hannibal in turn. “I can be adaptable.”

Hannibal licks his lips. Beneath Will’s hands, his muscles clench and release. Relax. “Yes, you can.”

Will stays there for a moment, just to prove his point. Then, with a sigh, he lowers himself onto Hannibal’s chest. Pushes, pulls, situates himself until he’s perfectly comfortable with no compromising. Hannibal seems content to let him.

It ends with their legs tangled, bodies entwined, Will’s right ear and cheek over Hannibal’s heart. The left side of his neck is free of pressure that way; the brand of Hannibal’s teeth exposed.

“Yeah,” Will murmurs, and his eyes close. “I’ll let you.”

Hannibal purrs, pleased at the victory. His arm settles around Will, brushing his knuckles over the dips of Will’s spine. “Good.”

They lie in silence for some time; long enough that Will’s mind starts to pleasantly wander toward dreams, steps timed with the beat of Hannibal’s pulse. Until, softly—

“I meant no offense when I mentioned protection. It was not for any other reason than convenience of cleanup and safety. If your preference is to not use a condom, I think it’s clear I have no complaints.” Here, Hannibal pauses. “I hope I haven’t led you to believe I’m unsatisfied with you, Will, or seeking fulfillment elsewhere. There could be nothing further from the truth.”

The words roll from Hannibal’s body into his. They wrap around his heart in broad swaths of both affection and regret. “I know that,” Will whispers. His hand curls into a fist on Hannibal’s sternum. “I know.”

For a moment, he’s half-sure he sees the shadow of the Ripper staring back at him from the far wall. He doesn’t lift his head. Doesn’t break that imaginary gaze.

“But even the *suggestion* of the thought, however unlikely, that there could be anyone else made me…” He goes quiet. Remembers the immediate, overwhelming, explosive fury. Outside, a car passes on the street; the flash of the headlights on the wall makes the Ripper’s silhouette melt away, disappear.

Will takes a breath. Rubs his cheek over Hannibal’s chest hair. “The sex is only part of it. The gifts too, even though the money is a different matter. I like feeling like you… *own* me. Not literally. Just… *physically.* Less about ownership, I guess, and more about possession. Don’t try to psychoanalyze that; I know it’s not healthy.”

“On the contrary, darling. Wanting a sense of belonging in the world, and finding it in partnership with another, is another of the oldest prerogatives of our kind. Perhaps the oldest of all.”

“It’s not just one-sided, though,” Will murmurs. No, it never has been. Will instinctively noses at his own wrist as he slips up, lays his fingers over the bandage, traces the edges of his bite. “I want to own you, too. I want you to be *mine.*”

And without hesitation, without pausing to think about it, simple and matter-of-fact, Hannibal replies, “I am.”

Will’s legs curl, tangling them more firmly together. His lashes lower, hand brushing down to Hannibal’s abdomen, the thick muscle there. He smiles when the muscles shiver beneath the blunt edges of his fingernails.

A monster on a leash. Will likes the sound of that.

Will tucks his arm against Hannibal’s side and snuggles in. Closes his eyes. “Good.”

In the middle of the night, wrapped in Hannibal’s warmth, Will’s eyes open. It’s a momentary realization, but a powerful one.

The hunt is on for the Chesapeake Ripper, and sooner or later, *something* will point back to Hannibal. The clues are there, if one knows how to look. They’re subtle. Nearly untraceable. But if Will found them, then given time, others will too.

Unless—

Something forms in Will’s mind; not even the realized outline of an idea, but the shadow of one. He has more than one problem. In fact, he has several concurrently. But with the right maneuvering, maybe they can all take care of one another and leave no one else the wiser.

But the more Hannibal knows, the more likely he is to object. It’ll have to be kept quiet, spoken softly and sweetly with pretty words; smoke and mirrors and best-laid plans. Even the Devil can be lied to if he’s in love.

Will settles into silk sheets, down blankets, and rests his head over the heart of a murderer.

If Jack Crawford wants the Ripper, Will’s going to give him what he wants.

Chapter End Notes

And here, we move into the meat of Part Three: Will's endgame.

[P.S. You can retweet that commission here.]

3:4

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! Long time no talk! I just got back from RDC5 (so great to see everyone!! literally just walked into my house lol) so it's time for more Headlines. Gonna try to get back to my every week/every other week schedule for posting. The con really made me want to buckle down and get this thing done, hopefully sooner than later, but I still have a ways to go with writing. The clear solution is to, like, write it.

ALSO!! A few things. I'm very, very behind on comments. However, when my girlfriend HigherMagic was visiting, she noticed my AO3 inbox was broken. In order to reply, I've had to manually go back through one at a time through each chapter to find and reply, rather than being able to bulk-reply. This however has now been fixed, which should (in theory) make it easier for me to get back to people going forward. Please know if I haven't replied that this has been a ridiculous time but that's no excuse, but I have absolutely seen and loved your comments and they have helped me get through a really tough time I'm having right now. <3

I seem to have migrated to Twitter in the wake of the Tumblr collapse. Feel free to follow me @maydaymaydei, but NOW MORE THAN EVER, if you want to see updates to your favorite fics on AO3, PLEASE SUBSCRIBE!! That way you get an email notification whenever updates are posted so you don't miss anything, since Tumblr is basically dead and Twitter can be limiting in who stumbles across your content.

tldr long note, here, have the chapter. shit's getting going and it's about to get good.

There is an ache in Hannibal’s shoulder when he awakens. It’s deep. Persistent. His muscles, too, are pleasantly strained in ways they aren’t usually.

He knows the cause well before he opens his eyes; knows it from the scent of skin and his own shampoo on a familiar form. When he opens his eyes, it’s to the sight of Will’s bare back dappled with bruises and faded scratches and a patch of gauze exposed to the open air, taped right along Will’s hairline.

It conceals the imprint of his teeth. His bite. His mark, which Will demanded with an unfaltering eagerness and wore last night with exhausted, sated pride. A low, satisfied rumble builds in Hannibal’s chest, a viscerally pleased hum of sound as he leans forward and touches his mouth to that bandage, then to the nape of Will’s neck.

Will doesn’t stir. His breath is soft, and his body radiates sleep-warmth. The acceptance is not just a conscious thing—even Will’s subconscious no longer recognizes Hannibal’s movements as those of a predator, a stranger. It knows him. Knows it is safe around him: a cub nestled inside the den of his

kin. The danger that lies here is not to Will, and never could be. They are only a threat to those on the outside.

And, as Will said, that ownership and belonging goes both ways. It is the only rational explanation for how Will was able to sink his teeth into Hannibal's flesh and live; his motivations were known, understood. Accepted. Reciprocated.

These matching wounds of theirs will surely scar. Even apart, they will never be parted. The evidence of Hannibal's influence will follow Will to the grave.

Hannibal touches his lips to the nape of Will's neck, eyes half-lidded and heavy as he listens to Will breathe. He's soft like this, hair mussed, but unfailingly lovely. He smells of lemongrass, of silk sheets. He smells like Hannibal. Like *Hannibal's*.

He's careful not to jostle Will as he extracts himself from bed, taking steps on silent feet toward the bathroom for his morning routine. Even the duration of his shave and the sound of running water as he brushes his teeth is not enough to stir Will from his slumber. It's with a smug sense of satisfaction that Hannibal realizes he must've worn Will out the night before.

Well, good. He needs his rest. And there's a certain pride in the passing thought that, too, perhaps Will sleeps better in his home and his company.

Just as Hannibal sleeps better knowing Will is nearby.

He doesn't allow that thought to dwell; simply takes note of it and lets it pass. It's truth, and one that is best acknowledged simply.

Will has changed him.

A full, fond, and fiercely possessive sensation expands inside his ribs as he re-enters the bedroom. Will is just as Hannibal left him, dark lashes fanned across high cheekbones, his hair a tangled mess. His lips are pink, parted slightly in sleep; his jaw is rough with second-day growth of stubble. It doesn't detract from Will's beauty in the least; there is a perfect marriage of masculinity and femininity present in his features, pale limbs loosely enshrouded in silk. The patch of gauze Hannibal taped on his neck last night is still clinging with what little sticking power remains on the adhesive. It's with only a moment's consideration that Hannibal goes to the bed and gently, carefully pulls it free.

He exhales in a breath. The ring of his teeth has left an imperfect circle of jagged marks, a dark and blooming bruise that pools like watercolor on the canvas of Will's pale skin. It's still shiny with the antibiotic ointment from the night before; in truth, it'll do well to dry out and scab over.

The sight of it is breathtaking. Sobering.

A lapse of control. One that could have ended much more poorly than it did. Hannibal's fortunate that Will has a propensity for biting, and what seems to be a similar passion for being bitten. Regardless, if his own aim had been less true… well, the neck is a sensitive place, full of nerves and tendons and fragile blood vessels. And as much as Hannibal would like to think he was calculating in his placement, the truth is much less thoughtful, in that it involved no thought at all. Action and reaction. Instinct.

Hannibal wants to touch; wants to allow his fingers to drift across Will's throat, to push on his bruises until he squirms and wakes, bleary with devotion and desire. In reality, though, he elects to have

mercy on his beloved and allow him to get the rest he sorely needs.

Breakfast would not be remiss, he's sure. Hannibal dresses in lounge pants and a comfortable sweater, and a dressing gown over both—the one Will had borrowed some weeks ago—and heads for the kitchen.

There is, after all, still some of the previous evening's *ham* that would incorporate nicely into a frittata, and pair well with the leftover stuffing and potatoes into a hearty morning meal.

The thought is a pleasing one. Indeed, Will had responded beautifully to everything Hannibal made him, and the offering of his own was more than Hannibal dared to expect—a venison tenderloin that was expertly butchered, and held no taste of bitter fear, which denotes a swift and decisive kill. He wonders what Will must have looked like out in the woods; a wraith smoothly gliding between the shadows of towering trees, stalking his prey through the dark. It's something Hannibal wants desperately to see in person, though indeed, having Will at his side sharing his bounty is its own keen pleasure.

They'll have time. Will has not yet seen through the veneer of Hannibal's persona to the creature within—though, in his defense, Hannibal has perhaps done *too* good a job of blinding him. He ruminates on this as he whisks eggs and cream in a mixing bowl, minding the wilting spinach and halved cherry tomatoes on the rangetop; cubes a generous portion of the ham, sourced from the well-muscled thigh of an inexcusably ill-tempered and oblivious jogger who Hannibal transformed entirely into ingredients, rather than make a display.

Will had asked him to wait, after all. To let him have his hunt. For the sake of his love, Hannibal can be patient.

He adds feta and sliced, pre-roasted artichoke to the pan, and waits until the cheese *just* starts to melt before he pours the eggs in. He tops it with more grated cheese, then puts the frittata in the oven to bake. The stuffing and potatoes are easy enough to warm in their foil-coated baking dishes before their ultimate transformation; he puts those in as well, and then starts on the coffee.

It doesn't take long for the food to be ready, though Hannibal does then have the decision of waiting for Will to wake, or waking Will himself. It'll all keep if he leaves it to warm, but…

Hannibal is not usually one to abide food outside the designated spaces in his home. The kitchen and dining room exist for a reason. However, he's been known to break trends on Will's behalf before, and he can think of none more classic to indulge in than this.

Hannibal huffs quietly as he extracts the wood-carved breakfast tray from his pantry, usually used to carry and present a full tea service. Today, he fills it with plates and utensils, mugs of coffee and a small saucer of cream, halved ripe strawberries drizzled with honey. His hands are steady and his steps are even as he bears his burden upstairs and nudges the door open with his foot, places the tray on his bedside table and sits carefully at the edge of the mattress.

Leans down. Brushes Will's bangs from his face with his knuckles, and touches his lips to the swell of Will's cheek, to the corner of his mouth. Will murmurs a soft sound of disturbance and discontent, and Hannibal smiles at it. Waits, as the scent of food and the offering of affection rouses Will from his rest with slow blinks and soft eyes that take a moment to come to focus.

A drowsy murmur. A flutter of his lashes. But then he wraps his fingers around Hannibal's wrist and pulls his hand close, lifts his head and pins the warmth of Hannibal's palm beneath his cheek. Will nuzzles him. Smiles. "Hey."

That full feeling expands inside his ribs until it's almost too much to bear. Hannibal strokes Will's cheek with the pad of his thumb. "Good morning."

Will's eyes drift down to the tray; a moment of stillness before realization sets in. Hesitance, and then radiant pleasure as his nostrils flare and Will inhales. "Did you make me breakfast in bed?"

"I did." Hannibal pushes a wayward curl behind Will's ear with his free hand; allows his fingers to drift over the sharp lines of his jaw, the texture of Will's growing stubble that persists down his throat, until his fingers rest just shy of the bite. He traces around its perimeter, drawing Will's attention to it —pulling Will's lashes down to his cheeks as he arches *toward* the pain, rather than away from it. Incredible thing. "Repurposed dishes from last night to make a Greek-inspired frittata with a side of potatoes, and pan-fried herb crisps made from last night's stuffing. And, of course, the most important element of all."

"Coffee," Will replies appreciatively.

"Of course."

Will's teeth flash in a grin, the corners of his eyes creasing; he shifts in place, an aborted little wiggle that is undeniably endearing as he reaches for Hannibal and pulls himself closer, curls down and around and pillows his head on Hannibal's thigh. Sighs from deep in his chest with a rolling sound that is not unlike a purring wildcat, and only winces a little at the tug of skin as he jostles the bite on his neck.

He says nothing. But then he reaches back for Hannibal's hand and holds it. Squeezes once. And then three times in rapid succession. Hannibal knows of different means of intimacy, both verbal and non-verbal. But the silent language of Will's love is one it seems he's already fluent in.

Thank you, Will says without words. *I love you.*

It's not ever something Hannibal intended to learn about himself, but as he reaches for the platter and slices a bite from the frittata, he realizes that there is a keen and primal pleasure in providing everything Will needs. That becoming his source of stability is not just a strategic gambit in the war for Will's unwavering allegiance, but also something that has become a source of his own fulfillment. It warms him, pleases him immeasurably, as he brings the first bite to Will's mouth and finds it accepted without hesitation and delightedly devoured.

Will chews, swallows. Melts against him, and casts a glance up through the wispy curls of his bangs. Smiles. "It's delicious." And then, with a blissful sigh, "Mm. I don't want to get up."

Hannibal brushes his thumb over Will's mouth and flashes a sharp smile of his own when Will catches it gently between his teeth. "You don't have to. Especially if you plan on eating me alive."

"Tempting," Will murmurs, and the glint in his eyes contains something fierce—a familiar presence. One that's not entirely tamed, and not entirely joking.

Hello, my love.

But the moment passes. Will's lashes dip, and he releases the tension of his teeth. Tilts his head and glances up, viciously intelligent. Wanting. "Can I have another bite?"

He could just as easily sit up and reach it. But that's not what Will is asking.

Hannibal cuts another piece with the side of the fork and spears it; can scarcely look away as Will's lips close around it, chew, swallow. Hums his appreciation. Tips his head to the side, and if not for the chaste kiss he presses to Hannibal's clothed thigh in thanks, he might think Will were deliberately showing off the bite to the pleased predator he lounges upon.

But, even without deliberation, that is exactly what Will has done.

Hannibal brushes his fingers over Will's cheek, and his eyes linger on the wound. It's high on Will's neck, above any collar's reach. It'll doubtlessly show whenever he turns his head. Whenever he ties his hair back. In fact, the only time it *won't* show is if he leaves his hair down, which is something Will rarely bothers to indulge in. He's far too active, too busy. Which means, moving forward, this claim of Hannibal's will almost always be on display.

It won't be sightly. But it will become clear to anyone who looks at Will that he has been marked by a creature of savagery, of blood and teeth. The brand Will left on him is not nearly so obvious. It will be hidden by every shirt, every suit. It will never be seen unless Hannibal is undressed, which is a rare thing to begin with. It highlights the loss of his own control. It should signify failure, but—

Will touches his own neck, drifts his fingers along the edges of the bite. His lashes flutter. His mouth tugs into a private, contented little smile.

"Thank you," Will murmurs, and Hannibal knows he is talking about being fed, and yet—

Hannibal bends, and Will's eyes startle open as lips touch his forehead. He murmurs, "My pleasure."

The snow outside has fallen thick over the city, several inches that will make traveling nearly impossible until it's cleared away—something for which Baltimore is exceedingly ill-prepared. A private snow-removal service is something Hannibal does not often have to make use of, but he knows he won't be the only one in his neighborhood doing so today. He stands in the entryway and mentally calculates how long it will likely take for the service to arrive; several hours, at least, due to the demand. Well, there's nothing to it. Fortunately he's not scheduled or on call today.

The sound of feet on the stairs draws his attention—Will, bright-eyed and clean-shaven, hair pulled up to the crown of his head. He wears that same loose black sweater that falls around his thighs, paired with red leggings that cling to the curves of his calves. The low collar does nothing to attempt to hide the bruise that spreads down the side of Will's throat, deep purple and furious red.

Will smiles when he notices Hannibal's eyes on it, and tucks himself against Hannibal's side. He's all soft sweetness, even without makeup—looks settled, now that he's completed his polished ritual. "It's not as bad as it looks," Will says quietly. As a doctor, Hannibal patently disagrees, but he doesn't get a chance to say as much. "What are you doing?"

"About to call a snow removal service," Hannibal replies, and leans over to brush his lips against Will's temple. "You may be trapped here for a while longer."

“Trapped,” Will scoffs. Still, he frowns out the window, head tilted. “It’s not that much snow, though.”

Hannibal, too, frowns. “It’s undoubtedly at least half a foot.”

“Yeah, but it’s not that cold.” Will shoots him a sidelong glance, deeply amused. “Where’s your shovel? I’ll do it.”

Aggravatingly self-sufficient. If there was ever a term to describe Will Graham… “You’ll strain your wound by moving your shoulder. It’s just scabbed over, Will, you need to be careful.”

Will, meanwhile, has already disentangled his arms from around Hannibal’s waist and has scooped his boots from the floor, and his coat from the closet where Hannibal tucked it away this morning, headed for the back door that leads into the garage. “I’ll be fine. It’ll take me like half an hour, tops.”

Hannibal follows him with a growl. Stubborn, insolent… “Are you so eager to leave?”

Will tosses an unimpressed glance back over his shoulder. “That’s some manipulative bullshit and you know it. I’m just going to shovel and clean off my car!”

He drops his boots unceremoniously at the back door and shoves his feet into them; is shrugging on his coat when Hannibal catches up to him, pushes Will by the shoulder until he spins and his back meets the doorframe. Hannibal is leveled with a gaze that is both amused and annoyed, the promise of a storm raging within a kaleidoscope of blue and green.

“You know you’re not gonna stop me,” Will says with an arched brow and a challenging set to his jaw.

“You’re being difficult,” Hannibal replies and leans in, touches his lips just shy of the bite just to feel Will gasp and squirm. “It’s unnecessary.”

“Everything you do for me is unnecessary.” Still, one hand curls into the hair at the nape of Hannibal’s neck, neither pulling him closer nor pushing him away. “You do it because you want to. I want to do this because I want to. You need to pick your battles better. You know I’ll have to clear about three times as much snow on my own property.”

“I wouldn’t know, I’ve never been.” Hannibal replies, teeth against Will’s jaw as he draws back, one hand on Will’s shoulder and the other on his hip to pin him in place.

“Seriously?” Will asks, exasperated. “Is that what this is about?”

“It seems to be now, yes.”

Will’s hand gentles. Then curls, and tugs *hard* at Hannibal’s hair. “It’s no excuse to be an ass. If you want to come over, then come over. I can’t promise it’ll suit your tastes.”

Hannibal growls quietly, agitated at the implication that he would ever find Will lacking. “You suit my tastes.”

“When it’s convenient,” Will retorts. “Then we get times like this, where I do exactly what I would normally do, and you decide that because you don’t like it, I shouldn’t do it. That’s not how any of this works.”

“Will—”

“Hannibal.” A standstill. Will’s head is tilted, his eyes are sharp, lips pursed. He waits until he knows Hannibal’s full attention is on him, unwavering. “I’ve never asked you to stop being everything that you are, and I never will. If you love me, extend me the same courtesy. This is a non-issue. When I have a problem I can solve myself, I do it. This is no different. So if you want to push me up against a wall, don’t make it about something as stupid as housework.”

Hannibal’s hands tighten. Of course, Will says this now—*now,* when he is missing a large portion of the bigger picture; an entire segment of Hannibal’s identity that is unknown, unexplored. But when the truth comes out, would Will ask him to stop? Would he dare to demand it?

Will sighs. Rolls his eyes. “I know this isn’t about shoveling. And I know this isn’t about my house, because I know you well enough to know that you’d just *show up* if you wanted to. Which means this is about you being concerned that I’ll hurt myself because you hurt me first—even though I *wanted* you to—and now you’re overcompensating. But whether you like it or not, I’m gonna go clear snow, then come back and shower. But if you’re still on this crap by the time I’m done, I don’t have an issue going home. The highways will be clear by now. Or…” Will’s hand slips under the lapel of the dressing gown, down to the hem of Hannibal’s sweater, and rubs his thumb over the crest of Hannibal’s hip with a slow smile. “…we could find something better to do with our time.”

Hannibal’s eyes narrow, though not in derision. Rather, in thought, and reluctant acceptance beneath a thin shield of his own stubborn denial. He breaks through it, with a voice in his ear that sounds like Will’s murmuring *atone for every hardship I’ve suffered at your hand.*

Hannibal sighs.

His eyes fall to the bite. It fills him with possessive pride, but also concern. Will is a creature newly marked, newly wounded. He should rest. Regain strength, no matter how strong he believes he is. And comparatively, yes, housework is trivial. It’s never been about the housework, though. It has always, *always* been about Will.

But Will’s right—there’s no stopping him.

“I’ll reiterate that this is unnecessary,” Hannibal replies, and takes a step back. Releases Will, and watches shrewdly as he stands tall and shrugs it off. Shoots Hannibal a glance. Rolls his eyes, and shrugs on the gray coat, belts it around his waist.

“Yeah, unnecessary, sure,” Will mutters, and lets himself into the garage. “City people, I swear.”

The door closes.

Hannibal huffs. He’s… impatient, and feels the need to pace because of it. Knows he must allow Will his freedoms if they are to keep the peace between them, even if a modest fee would eliminate the need for this menial work, but—

Hannibal pauses. Thinks. Smiles. Ah, of course.

Well, if Will insists on doing the work himself, then tit for tat, Hannibal will simply have to ensure that he’s adequately rewarded.

It doesn't hurt as much as he thought it might. Sure, it aches, but Will's dealt with…. similar levels of pain, but different pain. If that makes sense. Will's not sure it does.

There's no reason for Hannibal to protest him *shoveling*, of all things. But it's not about the fucking shoveling. It's about Hannibal not wanting Will to disobey him—and, really, he should have known better than to think Will would take that lying down.

He says as much as he gets out of the shower for the second time in twenty-four hours, though this time was decidedly less innocent than the night before. Turns out Hannibal's high-class provider thing might have a direct tie to Will being hot and sweaty from manual labor. Who knew.

"And I'm *fine,"* Will continues pointedly as he wraps his hair in a towel, changed into yet *another* set of clothing—black pants, this time, and a close-cut flannel shirt over a satin camisole. "So, seriously, you worried for nothing."

Hannibal doesn't dignify that with a response. "I saw Dr. Litchfield stop on her jog."

Will freezes. His cheeks go hot at the memory. "Uh, yeah. She introduced herself." Silence. When Will turns, he's speared by a pointed, expectant look. He sighs. "She may have gotten the impression that I was the help, since you have a reputation for being a bachelor. And then afterward, got all riled up about you letting your…" Here, Will pauses, and laughs. "*Girlfriend* do the outdoor work."

A flicker of exhausted dismay. "Yes, Dr. Litchfield has strong but rightful feelings about progressive household roles. I expect you corrected her?"

Will shrugs. "I just told her you weren't awake yet. That seemed to surprise her more than anything else." Hannibal approaches from behind, and Will hisses at the brush of antibiotic ointment over his wound. He swats at Hannibal's hand. "I don't care what impression your neighbors get about my gender. Unless *you* care, I guess."

"It's well established that I'm attached to any and every form you take," Hannibal murmurs, and kisses Will's cheek before he dresses for the day—a subtle blue-plaid pant with an unfortunately attractive navy shirt, which he rolls the open cuffs around his forearms. God, Will loves and hates when he does that. "Whether you present as male or female or neither affects my bearing very little."

At that, Will pauses. Pulls the towel free from his hair, and lets it rest, damp around his shoulders. He turns. "What do you identify as? Like… orientation-wise. I guess I never asked."

Hannibal blinks. Tilts his head, and gazes at Will in solemn consideration. "To me, the body a person resides in doesn't matter. I know many people say as much, but it's always been true for me. I appreciate aesthetics, but from a sensual standpoint, rather than from a point of sexual preference. I find intellectual stimulation to be the crucial aspect of holding my interest."

Will huffs. Smiles. Of course. A man like Hannibal cannot abide being bored. But… "I could see the way you looked at me from the very beginning. You're saying that was aesthetic appreciation? I was a mess."

"There's beauty to be found in disorder," Hannibal answers. Approaches, and leans down to touch his nose to Will's cheek, an affectionate nuzzle. "You brought chaos in your wake. And when you started speaking, I knew you were worth my time and attention. When we met again, it was good fortune. I

decided I wanted you in any capacity I could keep you. To this day, I have not once regretted my decision."

Good fortune? Bullshit. Will knows damn well now that Hannibal killed Andrew Caldwell *because* of their conversation. To draw him out. Bring him back. He knew Will saw him, or at least saw him better than anyone else had—and in that moment, Hannibal decided he *wanted* to be seen.

Will knows this, but he can't say as much. And denying Hannibal his desire has become so… *fun.* A power Hannibal is not fully aware of the magnitude in which Will possesses it.

So he leans back, denies him, so Hannibal can see the amused tilt to his mouth, the arch of his brows. "Not even once? Even when we're fighting about shoveling?"

"Something I never expected, admittedly," Hannibal replies with a fond tilt to his mouth, and leans in for a kiss—one that Will turns his cheek away with a grin and denies him again. He's met with a growl that sends a thrill to his belly, despite what they've only just finished. "I certainly never thought I would abide being challenged as you challenge me."

"Mm, how terrible," Will replies blithely, blatant instigation, and laughs as Hannibal lunges for him; twists away with careful footwork as Hannibal herds him toward the bed. Hannibal probably even thinks he's being clever about it. Probably thinks it's not clear to Will how much refusing his advances makes Hannibal eager to give chase. "And here I was thinking that you love a good challenge. That it's the only way to prove you're the best."

Hannibal's eyes flash, and Will's smile sharpens, brightens, and beneath his skin, Wilhelmina's claws extend at the sight of a monster staring back. She loves this. She loves *him.* God, fuck, Will loves him, *all* of him loves Hannibal this way. Vicious, brutal, never sated. He could gorge until he's full to bursting, and it would never be enough.

The only recompense, then, is to ensure they never run out of time.

Hannibal shifts his weight. When Will counters him in preparation, his pupils flare fat and black, eclipsing the red of his eyes. Proud predator, planning. Hunting. "Am I, that?" Hannibal murmurs. "The best?"

The best of all monsters, Will thinks, and watches Hannibal's muscles tense, preparing to pounce. He shouldn't have even bothered getting dressed. He laughs, exuberant, and says, "I guess we'll have to find out."

And Will runs.

He doesn't make it far—but, well, that wasn't really the game, was it?

Will's back and thighs are pleasantly warm as he wiggles in place in Hannibal's office chair, laptop open and at least two reference texts spread over the wide surface of the desk. It's much more comfortable than working at his kitchen table, he has to admit—there are certain luxuries of Hannibal's lifestyle that Will could easily become accustomed to. Designated comfortable and quiet spaces are one of them.

Having frequent, enthusiastic sex is another.

Will slouches into the chair; his lashes lower at the warmth from thin blanket spread over his lap, comfortable to a fault. It would be easy to drift into a nap, exhausted and exerted as he is. It's a shame he has homework to do, but Hannibal will probably be done lunch in another fifteen minutes or so…

Will inhales. His paper's almost done, it just needs proofreading—a final for his course focusing on viral media which, if *Analysis'* recent traffic is anything to go by, he'll ace without blinking. What's more important is the three levels of bullshitting his supposition: dancing around the truth as to not give too much insight to the investigation of the FBI, and bullshitting his own legitimate knowledge to divert attention as far away from Hannibal as possible.

It's exhausting—dividing himself like this. There is a version of Will who exists solely for Jack Crawford, available as a set of keen eyes at his beck and call. There is a version who exists for Margot, who is a supportive friend. A version for Hannibal, who by far sees the most of Will, but not all of him. Not yet.

And then, deep within, is Wilhelmina. And though Will is starting to feel the borders of his own shape solidify, he is realizing that they have both more and less in common than he ever expected.

Will is an amalgam, shifting. Fluid. Impermanent. Always watching, always learning, with as many names and identities as he needs to suit his purposes at any given time.

It works. But it's also exhausting work.

Will sighs and stands, draping the blanket over the back of the chair as he goes. He needs to stand, to move, get his brain working and blood pumping before he falls into the complacency of an afternoon nap. Fortunately, there's more than enough to look at that doesn't require him infringing upon Hannibal's domain in the kitchen, and won't allow him to get far enough from his own work to be permanently distracted. Books, artwork. Hannibal has no shortage of either.

What does the Chesapeake Ripper fill his time with, Will wonders? Or—what *did* he fill his time with, before Will came along?

Will knows him well enough now to theorize; before, he had suspected the Ripper would solely be a workaholic with no personal attachments, though polite acquaintances. Now, he knows that is reasonably true, but not *quite.* Hannibal is a man of many tastes, of culture, and acquaintances friendly enough to pass as friends to all that don't know him. And, in reality, *no one* knows him. There's not a soul on earth that would know how truly alone Hannibal had been before he came across Will; before Will came across him.

That time had to be taken up in other ways—other pursuits of the mind and body. And now he knows: Hannibal is a connoisseur of the arts, of language and culture and theatre, and a collector of literature and science. Will skims his fingertips along the monochromatic covers of scholarly books, leather and canvas and paper made soft with wear and age. Blue, green, black, maroon. Each is simple, likely antique or academically valuable, but none quite so beautiful until Will finds one that makes him pause. It is mottled brown, ridged on the spine in a way that reminds Will of ancient texts, with gold lettering that has bled in some places and can barely be read, other than the certainty that it's not English.

Just by the feel of it, Will knows it's not something he should touch. But Will has always been curious, and has always had a love of books, and Hannibal would not bother owning something like this unless it were important to him.

La Divina Commedia — Durante degli Alighieri

The pages of the book are fine, edged with gold. Will opens the front cover, and it creaks; beneath it lies pages that are thin as tissue, but twice as brittle and fragile, translucent with ink. Will doesn't dare turn the pages. He's not sure a book like this should even be touched with bare hands, rather than the soft cotton gloves of a restoration expert.

He closes the front cover, but as he turns to put it back, he notices a gap at the back, where the book jacket does not quite touch the gilded pages.

Will turns it over in his hands. Opens it, and finds a piece of paper tucked away, much newer than the book, written with blue ink. He's ready to write it off as private notes of Hannibal's, another item not to be disturbed.

And then he sees his name.

And then he sees the handwriting.

And then he takes the folded pages from inside the book and his tongue touches the back of his teeth as he pulls them apart, feels the ridges of his molars and canines as he reads the header *Intake Interview, Psychological & Brain Sciences MHS — William "Will" S. Graham* and knows, he fucking *knows* who and where these notes came from.

> *Will has difficulty making eye contact, both intermittent and extended. Responds to tangential threads of conversation when asked a direct question, extrapolating past comprehension of conversational partners. Exhibits low thresholds of friendliness and interpersonal outreach, as well as other symptoms traditional of Autism or other social development impairments.*
>
> *Unusual physical characteristics for biological sex. Long hair, manicured hands, traditionally female clothing. Defaulted to male pronouns. Perhaps either in denial or uncertain of gender identity.*
>
> *Thorough thought processes and hypothesis, well educated. Homeschooled, early graduate, attended Loyola University with a specialty in Forensic Sciences. Presents signs of hyperfixation and low conversational threshold. Great understanding of the human mind, little to no functional ability to communicate effectively…*

Here, the handwriting gets dense. Cramped. Will can practically *smell* the anxiety and excitement that has seeped into the page.

> *Exhibits low thresholds of sympathy at mentions of murder victims. Shows little sign of emotional disturbance at the plight of others. Unusual attention to detail regarding true crime statistics and accuracy of field medical reports. Fascinated with rate of decomposition as indicated by insect activity. Visibly impressed with feats of especially brutal and gruesome MOs. Dismissive of victim trauma and "inelegance" of strangulation/suffocation as a method of murder. Regards such methods as "artless". Exhibits signs of psychopathy and narcissistic personality disorder.*
>
> *Referred to self in first-person plural. Potential dissociative identity disorder. Gender expression a symptom of condition? Requires further assessment. Departed interview immediately following without apology or thanks.*
>
> *ACCEPT.*

Will's breath shudders from him.

He wants to tear them apart. He wants to destroy them. He wants to demand why Hannibal has them —for surely if they're in his possession he's read them. God, how *long* ago did he get them? A recent acquisition? Or do these notes form a mold from which the foundation of their relationship was cast?

It stings. Fuck, yeah, that hurts. But—

—but wait.

Will had never spoken to Hannibal about Chilton until long after their deal was struck, and even after their affection for one another had grown roots. Sure, it's been weeks since then. But it was after Hannibal first brought him home and nursed his wounds through the night. Well past their lunch together. Nearly a month following the murder of Andrew Caldwell.

Hannibal had more than enough time to know him *solely* as himself before that point. And still, he was attentive regardless—but based on his own opinions, his own knowledge.

Whatever opinions of Will that Chilton may or may not have fostered, they weren't the initial ones. They couldn't have been. But what these notes *do* indicate…

Hannibal *does* want a partner. More specifically, for *Will* to be that partner. However he came across these notes—and the torn edges don't indicate it was a friendly gossip session—he saw Chilton's shallow understanding of Will, of who and *what* he is, and saw something not only worth taking *from* him, but worth keeping someplace close. Here, in the heart of Hannibal's home: his office, among his valued books and possessions. A place he has opened to Will, physically and emotionally.

The love Hannibal feels goes deeper than Will's sight of him. It's not solely based in knowing and understanding, and now that Will can *see it,* the dominoes in his mind align, tumble, and fall.

Hannibal's fascination (his gentle and careful persuasions, his many grotesquely beautiful tableaus) have been based in the desire to *share* his art, not just create. Will had known this objectively; seen it from afar when the one being communicated with was a hypothetical, but in the wake of the revelation of the Ripper's identity, the dots connect—

Hannibal has always courted Will's violent side. Always, since before Mason, since before… *any* of this. And as the Ripper, he did the very same. Both sides of him, reaching for both sides of Will.

He *wants* a killer.

More specifically, he wants *Will* to kill *with* him.

God. How could he have been so stupid?

Will inhales and exhales shakily; tucks the notes back where he found them and places the book back on the shelf in exactly the place he found it. Makes sure the spines are aligned, that no dust is disturbed— *ha,* like Hannibal would ever allow dust in his office, Jesus, he's getting paranoid—

But is it paranoia if every instinct of Will's has been right? Hannibal loves him, true. But in his ignorance of Will's knowledge, any one wrong step could be the slip that informs him of what Will knows. And with a creature as prone to fits of instinct as the Ripper—as Hannibal—

You could tell him, Wilhelmina murmurs from inside his ribs. *He would accept us. He would rejoice for having us. We know it's what he wants.*

Will turns. Breathes. Sits at Hannibal's desk, and settles into the office chair; directs his thousand-yard stare at his laptop, whose screen has long since gone dark.

He could. He could go to Hannibal right now and whisper *I know, I know, it's okay, I know,* and this would all be so much simpler.

But.

But what's the fun in that?

And, oh, she *likes* that answer. And so does Will.

Because he *likes* the side of Hannibal he's seen since he finally figured it out. Those glimpses into darkness are tantalizing; playing with him is a new high—God, even now Will's thighs and back still sting and burn from being caught and pinned, Hannibal accepting Will's frantic, wordless nod as consent without fuss, and. And.

The truth is, there's a high in knowing he has the Ripper on a choke chain, and knowing his beloved monster has no idea he fastened the shackle around his throat himself. But the moment Hannibal realizes it, especially if he's to find out that Will has known without his awareness, there will be a new analysis of every move Will makes. Namely, he won't be underestimated anymore.

But if Hannibal believes his innocent beloved is capable of *enjoying* the darkness, even before he's aware, then maybe he can push Hannibal to admit it. The very thing he seems reluctant to do. It's a game of chess—in which Hannibal is unaware that Will is the black King and Queen in one. And Will refuses to be the first to submit.

But whether he does or doesn't almost doesn't matter at all.

Will ducks his head. Presses the heels of his hands to the hollows of his eyes and sighs. Inhales. Exhales.

This can be a good thing. Hannibal's ignorance gives him more freedom to execute his gambit. He can be both jealously claimed and viciously defended.

He doesn't have to know Will is both his captor and his champion. Not until their way free together is clear. And Will can ensure that. He's sure he can.

A chuckle beside his ear causes Will to startle hard. Goddamn, that man can move like a demon slipping between shadows. Warm, broad palms settle on his shoulders, and a quick kiss is pressed to the apple of his cheek. "You seem deep in thought, beloved."

"It's done," Will murmurs, even as he tips his head to expose more of his cheek, his throat. The bite aches and the sting is so sweet. "Just needs proofreading. And *you* need a bell."

Hannibal laughs at that, really and truly. "My apologies. I didn't mean to startle you."

"Bull," he retorts fondly, and turns to offer a wry smile. "I've heard you walk like a normal person. You only do the silent walk when you want to catch me off guard." And it's true, but the reality of Hannibal creeping up on him while seated means that he didn't see Will's discovery of the stolen notes. He would have intervened to defend himself more immediately, otherwise. To mitigate the damage before it could be fully done.

Hannibal hums, feigned consideration. “I have no need to catch you off guard. Well. Not right now, anyway.” An amused purr; a nibble at Will’s tender earlobe that draws a bark of laughter from him as he reaches back to slip his fingers into Hannibal’s hair in a gentle scritch. He hums appreciatively at the blunt touch of Will’s fingernails. “As much as I hate to distract you from your education, lunch is almost ready.”

“Shame,” Will drawls sarcastically, and tips his head back onto Hannibal’s shoulder. Tips his chin, and touches his lips to the underside of Hannibal’s jaw. “Mm. Sounds fantastic.”

Hannibal makes a pleased sound, but one of mild disbelief. “I haven’t even told you what we’ll be having.”

Will pushes back from the desk; turns in the chair and holds out his hands, until Hannibal obligingly, obediently pulls him to his feet. Will rewards him with a wide, affectionate smile; revels in the momentarily stunned gleam in Hannibal’s eyes, that in no time at all fades to familiar, affectionate contentment.

“Doesn’t matter; I know it’ll be delicious.” Will squeezes his hands before he drops one; holds patiently, diligently onto the other. Lowers his voice as he murmurs, “I trust you.”

Hannibal *glows.* And if there is something deeper in the darkness of his eyes, well—it’s nothing Will didn’t expect to see.

“Well, then,” Hannibal says. “Your faith in me is akin to only my own. Regardless, I think you’re well past due to be fed.”

“If you insist,” Will murmurs, and rolls the word tentatively on his tongue before he adds, “Mylimasis.”

A flicker of stunned shock. And then the smile he is leveled with is brighter than the sun.

And, oh, with a smile like that, how could Will ever be expected to let him go?

The night has fallen dark and thick over Washington; it’s out of Will’s way on his drive home, but undoubtedly the safest place for them both. Another dive bar, this one not even quite so dignified as the last; this time, Will takes the appearance of a lovely young woman with picture-perfect eyeliner and lipstick. Well dressed. Out of place. His companion, with tousled hair and a cheek pink with impact.

Will is no fool to the origin.

The mark is not only fresh—but if it lasted the ride from Bethesda, it was far more stinging than it appears now. It may even bruise.

And Abel’s expression is one of a man who feels nothing. No anger, no sadness, not even acceptance. It’s blank. Empty.

He made himself this place in Abel’s life with the knowledge that someday he would have to cut himself loose from this one-sided dependence, from Abel using him as a crutch. But, here and now, it

is a reliance that has become integral to his own survival.

This needs to go a certain way. And in order to see the moves that will lead him to the final destination, he needs to pick each word with care. Needs to look ahead to every reaction.

He needs to think like the Ripper. He needs to think like Hannibal.

Will sits back in the corner booth. Takes this in, and processes. Thinks carefully about how to proceed, and Abel watches him as a wounded, cornered thing might watch something new and strange that has come across it, uncertain whether it is friend or foe.

Will is neither, of course, but it's important that Abel regard him as a friend.

"What set her off?" Will asks, because that is a very different question with different connotations than *why did she hit you* or *what did you do*? It's a question that by its very nature offers sympathy and understanding. For Abel Gideon, that has always been what Will is *for*—a fundamental comprehension deeper than anyone else has ever been able to offer. Something solely Will can give him.

His voice is toneless. "I don't know. The color of my suit for a benefit that I wouldn't even care about if it weren't for the hospital. I suggested blue, and she said it was too close to purple and we just did purple, and I said I didn't care, and she said I should but I really couldn't give less of a fuck." He goes silent. "It doesn't matter. She can hit me but she can't hurt me. She can't control me."

Will nods. Just once. "No," he says, "she can't."

Abel stares at him. At first, he says nothing. Then—"You're not treating me like a victim of abuse."

Will maintains his casual slouch. His distance. But his intensity is close and intimate when he answers, "Because I know you're not a victim. I know you've already made your decision about how you're going to handle this."

Finally, a spark of light in Abel's eyes. But it's not joyful, no—it's a cold gleam, a cruel glimmer. "Do you?"

Will huffs gently through his nose. Tilts his head, as he's seen Margot do a thousand times, and feels his curls tumble over his shoulder in that same sweep he always found so elegant. Now it just feels heavy. But the knowledge of Gideon's decision is not. It's just… there.

"Of course I do. It's why you called me. It's why you came here. It's why Annalise isn't already dead on the floor where she stood. You want me to talk you out of it." Will sits up straight and places his forearms on the table beside his empty glass. Leans forward. Blinks slowly, in a facsimile of careful consideration. Inhales. Exhales in a sigh, a show of resignation. Brow crinkling in consternation, in concern. Lips pursed in worry, parting over small, sharp predator's teeth. "But I'm not sure I can do that, Abel. Even if I manage it this time, she's going to escalate as she realizes more and more that she can't control your actions. Eventually it'll reach a breaking point in a fit of passion, and then there won't be anything I can say to make it better."

Abel Gideon is silent. Stares down into his untouched drink. It's beer. Cheap stuff. The kind he's not allowed to drink at home because it gives a *bad impression* of his tastes. Like Abel Gideon has ever been a man of taste, instead of a man of creature comforts. Of base instinct, instead of opulence.

That is where he and the Ripper fundamentally differ. But in all else, they are remarkably similar. Personality types. Professions. Background expertise. Social standing. And, because of the hold Annalise Gideon has had on her husband's adult life, they run in almost identical circles, and are known by the same people—up to and including the Vergers.

Will doesn't bite the inside of his cheek to hide his smile; as deeply sunken into a different headspace as he is, he simply never allows it to form. But the amusement is there, beneath the surface, circling like a shark.

"Once you make a move, Abel, your fate will be decided. You'll be caught and put in jail as one of a thousand men every year who kills their wives. The second they apprehend you as the murderer, this story is over, and *their* narrative of what happened takes over. I can promise it won't end in your favor."

And Will smells blood in the water.

He reaches out and lays his hand over Gideon's, a gentle, sympathetic touch. His lips are pressed together. Grim. Determined. "But I can create a different narrative. I can help you, if you ask me to. One that doesn't have to name you at all, but doesn't deprive you of the vengeance you crave."

His eyes lift. When he stares at Will, it's like he sees him for the first time. Even now, Will is sure he only sees the vaguest outlines of Will's shape. Abel Gideon is a clever man, and may have even once strove to be a good one, but Will is something different entirely.

Unlike Abel, he has never harbored any illusions about himself. He knows exactly what he is, and where his allegiances lie.

This is the first step.

"How?" Gideon asks.

Will smiles.

Hook, line, and sinker.

3:5

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your well wishes and amazing comments! It's great to be back, and this story is finally starting to pick up and clip right along. I'm so glad to be back on my bullshit and I can't wait to get this party started.

NOW HERE IS MY OBLIGATORY WARNING. THE LAST SCENE OF THIS CHAPTER DOES CONTAIN UPSETTING CONTENT, ie: Mason Verger being Mason Verger as he relates to Margot Verger, and all that entails. Please see the end notes for more specific potential trigger information.

Okay, carry on.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The inside of Abel's car is dark. Will's skin crawls at the thought of being here, concealed and alone, but a familiar environment breeds comfort, and they need comfort and safety for this talk. They need trust. He *needs* Gideon to trust *him.*

"You know what I've been doing."

"Of course."

"Well, I'm working for the FBI."

Gideon turns and stares. A moment of silence stretches into an eon. "I… am not seeing how this isn't leading to me being immediately arrested."

Back pressed hard against the leather passenger seat, Will waves his hand vaguely. "Abel, that is so far from my concern. I'm not an agent. I'm specifically a consultant to help them apprehend the Ripper." Will licks his lips. Would very much like to get away, to go *home,* but knows he can't. Not if he doesn't want to be overheard. Not it he wants to maintain this trust between them. Not if he wants to appear genuine. He sinks his teeth into his lip, eyes lowered, the picture of guilty contrition, speaking in hissed, hushed whispers. "And I wouldn't… if I didn't have to. They caught up to me. This was my only way out of being prosecuted. Believe me when I say that they'll stop at *nothing* to catch him. If they thought of staging a scene as a Ripper kill, they'd do it themselves. If we get ahead of them—how would the FBI know any different if I made it look legitimate? In the end, they'd *thank* me, if they ever found out any different." Will's lip curls, and he meets Abel's shadowed eyes in the dark. "But they won't. Claiming the Ripper's title would draw him out. They'll be able to catch him

that way. And he." Will inhales. Exhales through his nose, and takes in Gideon's stone-faced expression. "He's seen my articles. He's obsessed with me. Once they catch him, what's one more body? If it's for me, he'd admit to it. Take credit for it. I know he would. It's exactly what he wants. And he doesn't have to know the killing blow wasn't mine—just the rest. And the FBI doesn't have to know it isn't his."

Gideon breathes silently. Doesn't move, but for turning forward and staring out through the windshield and into the dark. "It wouldn't work. The forensics—"

"I was three years into an honors scholarship for forensics when my dad died," Will says softly. "I wrote the standard monograph on time of death by insect activity. I had prospects lined up that I decided to leave behind because of the way people treated me for being *different.* Believe me when I say that if you *do* as I say, they'll never catch you. I know my forensics. And once I'm done with the scene, there won't be anything to find." Will takes a breath. Takes in the rigid set of Abel's spine, and understands it for what it is. "I'm not trying to fuck you over, Abel. I want to help you. And this could be a win-win for both of us. You get what you need. And I not only get to… to *find* him," Will murmurs, "but to talk to him. And to know that, in the end, no matter what I've done, Hannibal is safe."

Gideon's nose wrinkles. He frowns, and looks to Will. "Hannibal?"

"Yeah." A breath. A sigh. The truth. "Abel, everything I'm doing is to protect Hannibal. To keep him safe from all this. If you trust one thing, trust *that."*

His expression is blank. Almost unreadable. Almost. "You really love that guy, huh?"

"More than anything," Will answers evenly. Without sentiment. Just fact. "If it weren't for him, this would be going very differently."

Well, it's not exactly a lie. And somehow there is no guilt, but only relief, at the realization that the lies are coming more naturally, now.

Gideon taps his fingers on the steering wheel, despite the fact that the car is off. No indication that anyone is inside. Just as Will instructed. "Can you live with it?"

"What?" Will asks, amused and almost dismissive. "Mutilating a body? Yes. The real question is, can you live without taking the credit?" Will's voice hardens. Sharpens. "Will you be able to keep your mouth shut for the rest of your life? Because I'm *not* going to jail for you, Abel. I'm just not. You're either all in or you're out. You listen to every word I say, or we go our separate ways, and this conversation never happened. So which is it gonna be?"

Gideon sits still. Doesn't speak. The wheels turn visibly in his head, but he's considering. Heavily. "What's to say you won't get caught a second time? The FBI already caught up once."

Will bares his teeth; snaps them near-silently in the gloom. God, how Wilhelmina would love to tear Freddie's fragile throat out. "I'll take care of Freddie Lounds. And the FBI won't have any reason to suspect either of us." Will turns to Abel. Bares his teeth. "There's someone else who could, hypothetically, fit the role of the Ripper. We've both already met him. And given the thinly-veiled threats he made, he has as much motive implicating him in the murder of Annalise as anyone else. He has enough money to get away with anything. He's exactly the right type. Smart. Well-connected. And everyone around him knows exactly what type of person he is. He has a history of abuse. No one would be surprised."

Gideon's eyes narrow. His fingers drum frantically. His mind whirs. Will can practically taste the tension as he works it out, and then—

His eyes widen. His pupils constrict. "Verger?"

Will nods. Glances down at his hands in his lap. "Mason's been emotionally abusing his sister as long as I've known him. It's recently transitioned into physical abuse. He can't hide it anymore. And I…" Will licks his lips. Bares his teeth, and looks up at Gideon. "He's a preferential offender. A pedophile. An intelligent sadist who delights in power over others. And even though he's not our guy, he *could* be. If I let the Ripper believe that someone's trying to steal his credit, he won't take kindly to it. And if I name Mason, he won't last long. All problems solved."

Even daring to sully the Ripper's name with Mason's crimes makes his stomach turn. But Mason could fit the role if Will decided he did. As far as Gideon knows, he *has.*

"Then why not move in on him?" Gideon asks. "Bring him in. Accuse him publicly. Wouldn't that do the same thing?"

Will shakes his head. "We won't have any hard evidence until I put his DNA at our scene, and if we give Mason any heads up that we're planning this, his father will have him out of the country before we can blink. I know I can do this, but I need time. I need the opportunity." Will purses his lips. Leans back against the passenger seat. Is lying usually this easy, or does it only seem so because he's gotten used to deceiving a master of deception? "There's another gathering coming up. Hannibal's already invited me—the one for Johns Hopkins, the holiday benefit. Mason's almost sure to be there. The Vergers are *always* at that sort of thing. I can get DNA, then plant it at the scene we make afterward. Stage it like a Ripper kill. Name him to the FBI and point the smoking gun, and let the real Chesapeake Ripper do the rest. Then I let the FBI bring in the actual killer."

Gideon is silent for a while. Traces his tongue over his teeth. "I hate the idea of everyone thinking he did it," Gideon says. At least he has the good sense to admit it, because Will *knew* that would be his hang-up in the end. "But I Iike the idea of the both of them getting what they deserve."

Will nods once. "I agree."

The only sound is that of their breath. The pounding of Will's heart in his throat, even though he knows—

"Okay," Gideon says. "Yes. If you're in, I'm in."

It's not a relief. To say it is a relief would presume that Will ever thought he'd end up with a different outcome. But, no. He knew this would be it in the end.

"Good." Will inhales. Exhales. Doesn't fidget with his hair, or pick at his nails, or anything that would make him appear anything but perfectly confident in himself. And he is. "For the next few weeks, you need to be on your best behavior. When you play the part of a grieving husband, we need everyone to believe you."

Gideon turns to him in the dark. "And what about you?"

Wilhelmina paces restlessly inside him. She's so ready for this—ready to run, off the leash. The she-wolf howling for her mate in the night. He's almost ready to let her. "The Ripper is a master of layered symbolism. I need to come up with an appropriate message, and prepare for the finer details

of obscuring our forensics while placing Mason's. Then I need to lead the FBI in the wrong direction, so that when the time comes, they'll be prepared to believe what I want them to believe."

When Will looks at him again, they are, the both of them, stone-faced creatures of death.

"Do you really think you can get away with it?" Abel asks.

Will runs his fingers back through his hair. His lashes lower. Around them, the parking garage in which they are concealed buzzes with a quiet thrum of energy; old lights and stale gasoline. Urban entropy. "I know I can." Then he reaches for the door handle. Pops it. "I'll be in touch."

The door slams behind him as Will climbs out of the SUV and pulls his coat closer around his shoulders. His neck aches, a deep and dull throb. His heels click on the concrete as he walks up the incline toward the surface in the gloom. Out, away. Toward his car, his home, a future of his own making—one for him and Hannibal to share.

Damn the rest.

December barrels into the tri-state area with a vengeance; a brutal cold snap freezes the snow and ice where it's fallen, and each morning commute is as drawn-out as it is treacherous. It suits, in a way, the mood that has followed Hannibal for the days since he last saw Will. A certain empty space in every room, on every chair, beside him in bed. The world revolves around all the places that Will is not, and it's maddening.

The bite has healed nicely; it's something always on Hannibal's mind, whether it's hidden beneath his surgical scrubs or his many fine suits. Dark red impressions that will lighten as they age. It makes him wonder what Will's looks like now.

The idea picks at him, a consistent sensation in the back of his brain. Will is busy, he knows this. The semester is ramping up toward its inevitable conclusion, giving way to a steady flow of academic reviews and final papers. But the less time Will has for his own personal pursuits, the longer it will take him to catch up to the Ripper. To Hannibal.

But he's beholden to his promises, verbal and nonverbal. Will has asked him not to draw undue attention as the Ripper, and so he won't. Not now.

But that means he has to be patient.

Or he can draw Will out in other ways.

It's how he finds himself in the university campus library late one night, dressed down to plainclothes; a white shirt and khaki slacks, half as refined as he would normally care to be. He wears an ID badge not dissimilar to Will's that would denote him as a professor if he cared to allow anyone close enough to look. A pair of thick-framed lenses perch on the bridge of his nose; modest readers that he is unfortunately resigned to the fact that they *do,* to some mild extent, magnify his detail vision. As he peruses the books in the heavy reference section, he makes a mental note to make an appointment with an optometrist.

He knows what he is here for, and knows it as soon as he sees it: a mane of wild red curls at a table in the corner, laptop and books spread asunder. Freddie Lounds is deep in concentration as she taps away at whatever assignment she's working on.

Hannibal prepares himself for a wait; with the digitalization of most modern reference texts, it may be hours before Freddie leaves her belongings unattended.

Fortunately, he needn't wait long.

With a blustering sigh and a look of pure, raw frustration, Freddie stands and stretches and snatches up her lanyard from where it rests beside her laptop, and a gleaming smartphone in a red leather wallet-case. She pats her pockets and glances around; Hannibal, hidden where he is through several aisles of texts, goes unseen. He waits until she retreats toward the ladies' restrooms before he moves.

Though Freddie's clothes err on the side of what might be called *trendy,* her bag is old and worn. As such, it is to Hannibal's incredibly good fortune that upon opening it, he finds a tear in the lining inside. With a surreptitious glance about, and discovering he is, indeed, alone, he removes Frederick's notes from where they are tucked inside a handkerchief in his breast pocket; uses the kerchief to shield the paper from his prints, and slips the notes through the slit. A quick jostle of the bag knocks them out of sight, well-concealed unless the bag should be completely emptied and the distension of the lining should be discovered—and, as Hannibal has learned through his interactions with Will, a student's bag is almost never lacking in a surplus of belongings.

If he's lucky, Freddie may not ever discover the notes he's put in her possession. However, should she stumble across them, Hannibal is confident that she'll find an appropriately distasteful use for them.

Whether or not she discovers them, and whether or not Will discovers she's in possession of them, Hannibal is certain that the notes' absence will be noticed. When the time comes, he will know exactly where to direct the attention.

"My apologies, Ms. Lounds," Hannibal murmurs as he zips the bag closed. "It appears I'm being terribly rude."

Will seems to bring it out in him.

He makes himself scarce long before Freddie's return, and drops the lenses into the trash bin on the way out. He can't imagine what Will's response would be to finding them, but he's ruefully certain it would be amusement solely at his expense.

Quantico is not a place made for comfort, or to feel welcoming. It's starkly utilitarian, a veritable fortress of brick and concrete blocks, paved walkways and a groomed campus that suffers little by way of greenery, even in the summer.

But for all that it lacks in beauty, there's still a bittersweet sense of melancholy that follows Will as he walks the paths, the sterile halls. As trainees look at him curiously, and he does his best to bite back the persistent prickle of envy.

He'll never know what might've been in another life. Perhaps he would've bowed his head and cut his hair, gotten accepted to the Law Enforcement Academy back home. Maybe he would have disregarded Frederick Chilton and gone to Johns Hopkins regardless, and ended up a psychiatrist in his own right. Maybe he would have gone back to forensics and pursued a PhD in entomology. Any one of those roads could have led him here, like he dreamed of when he was young.

Back then, he didn't understand his need to chase the darkness and catch it. Then, he thought it was in the pursuit of greater justice. The high ground of morality and the struggle of men.

Now he knows better.

Now he knows Hannibal, and Will wouldn't take back a single day since they met for the world.

Which has brought him to now.

"Will," Jack says in greeting, and stands aside. He casts a surreptitious glance into the hallway as Will sidles by. "Did you have any issues getting onto campus?"

Miriam is already waiting inside, leaning back in her standard-issue chair, legs crossed at the ankles. She perks up when Will enters and salutes with two fingers in greeting. Will returns it with a nod.

"No issues," he replies, and pins Jack with a firm look. "You'll make sure there aren't any records of my being here?"

"I'll have my visitor log purged at the end of the day." Jack closes the door to the office, little more than a glorified cubicle. No windows. Few personal effects. Fluorescent lights, and foam squares for a ceiling. The working space of a man attempting to claw his way to the top. Jack, like Miriam, is collared by his ambition—and in his quest for notoriety, he'll unintentionally allow Will to lead them in whatever direction he sees fit, so long as he believes it'll land them the Ripper.

Oh, Will intends to give him the Ripper. But he has no intention of giving him Hannibal.

"So." Jack rounds his desk, but doesn't sit behind it. Leans back against it, legs spread, standing proudly—and gestures for Will to sit in the chair opposite Miriam. Maintaining dominance. Will suppresses a sigh, but does as he's bid without complaint or outward expression of dissatisfaction. "You're the one who called this meeting. What do you have?"

Will sits. Places his bag down between his feet, and takes a breath. Looks down at it; lets his hair fall into his face, flowing free around his shoulders. Hiding Hannibal's bite from view, but also putting forth the appearance of nerves.

His breath shudders.

Miriam makes a sound of concern. She leans forward, gently brushes her leg against his own. "Kid, it's okay. You're safe here."

Kid, she says. *Kid,* like Will is a child in need of guidance. Like he's not the captain at the helm in his own right. *Kid.*

Will exhales slowly, silently, and looks up. To Miriam, with a thankful approximation of a smile. To Jack, with that smile faltering. "I think I have a lead on the Ripper."

The tension is palpable. Both lean forward, intrigue sparked in their eyes.

“Who?” Jack asks.

Step two. Will’s hands tighten on the strap of his bag, fidget with it. “I’m not sure yet.” At Jack’s blustering sigh, he cuts back in. “Jack, I’m doing my best. I don’t want to guess and condemn someone to the court of public opinion without evidence—”

“And my job is to find the evidence,” Jack argues. “We need to narrow it down so I can find some, start bringing people in for questioning—”

“No,” Will snaps back. “I *know* this guy, Jack. We need to have him pinned *before* we bring him in. If we come at him with anything less than a rock-solid case, he’s gonna walk. There’s no forensics. Everything is circumstantial. Which means I need to be *damn* sure before I start throwing names around.”

“What did you find?” Miriam asks. Her elbows are on her knees, eyes bright and intense. Eager. “What was it you saw?”

Got her. Will leans down, bends at the waist and flips his messenger bag open. Digs in for the files, and is on his feet in an instant. Goes to Jack’s desk, and they flank him as he spreads the pages out on the surface, side by side. “I went back through the cases I’ve seen. And I realized that they’ve changed. The Ripper used to make these—*monuments* to his own greatness, right? Inside jokes with himself.”

The man in the church. The woman on the docks. Andrew Caldwell. He gestures to each, and sees Jack and Miriam nod.

“But, it’s only *after* Caldwell that he started making these bastardized Tarot scenes.”

The Hanged Man. The Ace of Wands. The Ten of Pentacles.

Jack frowns deeply. “Your point?”

“That’s when he started communicating with me,” Will replies, breathy and almost faint. He swallows hard. “Or trying to. So he had to have found my work somehow. So I went into my website analytics. And I’ve been using a VPN to reroute my IP for the last few months any time I logged in or posted. But I noticed a login that was using the same IP I had used in the past, which shouldn’t have been possible.” Inhale. Exhale. “He spoofed my IP. And from there, he got my email. And from my email, he got my name.”

“That easy?” Miriam murmurs.

“Easy?” Will snaps. “That’s not *easy.* With the traffic my site’s been getting, he must’ve tried a thousand different IPs before he found one that *happened* to be mine, and the worst part is, we can’t reverse his work and figure out where *he* was trying to access from. This guy’s a genius.”

Jack waves his hand impatiently, dismissively. “If we can’t use it to find him, then how does this help us?”

“It helps us because, if I date it back to the duplicated login, I know that sometime in the middle of November, he figured out who I am. That’s *after* Jack found me.” Will looks to Jack, and they share a nod. “And it means that sometime after that, he figured out what I look like.”

Will touches the Ten of Pentacles photo—his doppelganger. Presses his lips together, and looks to Jack.

“And that means he has to have seen me. Now, UMD’s not a closed community, but we’ve established this guy is pretty put together, and that doesn’t scream college campus to me. He has medical or hunting know-how of some sort. He belongs with the elite crowd; he has means. And in late November, there’s only one place I would have gone that someone like that would have seen me.”

Jack’s eyes light with understanding. “The Orchestra fundraising gala.”

Expression flickering, crumbling, Will nods. His shoulders tense and roll inward. “I mean, Hannibal introduced me to almost everyone that night. It could have been any one of them, and he would have known me as soon as he heard my name.”

“Has anyone approached you?” Jack asks. “Reached out to you?” Will hesitates. Jack notices immediately. “Who is it?”

“I need to be *sure,* Jack,” Will replies softly. “Before I can ruin someone’s life.”

“Will, you’re in *danger,”* Miriam sighs. She sounds frustrated, like he’s naive.

Will huffs. Turns. Marches back to his chair and sits down. Well, if they want to believe he’s a child, let him act like one. He stares balefully up at the both of them. “The Ripper wouldn’t hurt me. He thinks he’s in love with me. Which means if you want to catch him, I have to hold strong. I have to let him think I’m sympathetic. Draw him in. Let him approach me.” Will licks his lips. Lowers his eyes. “And think I’m… receptive to that.”

Jack’s face twists with disgust. “And how do you suggest we do that?”

“I don’t think there’s any *we* about it,” Will murmurs. “I think I just have to… let it happen.”

“Will.” He looks up. Miriam looks worried. Jack’s face is nothing but ice, cold and hard. “I need to trust you. How can I trust you if you won’t tell me who you think it is?”

“It’s not like you can put a cop outside my house,” Will replies irritably. “He’s not that kind of guy. He won’t be caught like that. Like it or not, I’m all you’ve got. I’m a good fisherman, Jack. I can do this.”

“And what about Hannibal?” Jack snaps.

Will’s rabbit heart skips a beat and goes still. “What *about* Hannibal?”

“You’re putting him in danger. You’re willfully antagonizing a murderer by letting your *boyfriend* walk around in what may be the presence of a killer, without any idea of the risk to his life. You think that isn’t selfish?”

Will’s on his feet before he thinks about it. Wilhelmina snarls within his spine, behind his eyes, and Will narrowly avoids baring his teeth. Narrowly. He squares off. Meets Jack’s eyes head-on, blazing from the inside. A challenge. “Jack, *everything* I am doing is to keep him safe.” Will swallows hard. “So I’d *really* appreciate if you don’t make assumptions about what I’m doing and why.”

Jack takes a step forward. Then another. “Well, it’s difficult for me not to make assumptions when you won’t *tell* me what you’re doing.” His teeth grind. His fist clenches at his side, but Will doesn’t cower. He’s strong. Defiant. Even though cowering might better serve his purpose now, he can’t. Won’t. “I am *risking my career* by allowing a civilian access to this case. I got you the intel I have so you could share you insights, not conceal them. You *owe* me, Graham.”

Will huffs through his nose. His lip starts to curl, and then—

“Alright, alright, alright. Jesus. Break it up.” Miriam cuts between them and forces them apart with the lengths of her arms. “Infighting isn’t gonna help us. Will.” She sighs. Cocks her hips, and in this moment, she reminds him of Margot. “You’ve gotta give us something if you won’t give us a name. You have a plan. What is it?”

Will huffs. Rolls his head on his neck, rolls his shoulders and hears them pop. He shoots Jack a baleful glance.

Well, there’s nothing else to it but to give them as much of the truth as they can stand.

“The Ripper’s a blue blood. That means I need to integrate myself to high society and give him all the opportunities possible to interact with me again, and wait and see if he does.” He runs a hand back through his hair, pushes his bangs from his eyes. The back of his neck is damp with sweat, and he longs to pull his hair up. He doesn’t. “And *when* he does,” Will corrects himself, “I let him in. Let him close. Let him know me—or let him think he knows me.”

“And then?” Jack asks.

“Then I get proof.”

His eyes narrow. His jaw twitches. *“How?”*

Will lifts his chin. Tastes desire like blood and honey on his tongue.

Inhale. Exhale.

“Then I ask him to kill someone for me,” Will replies softly, and Miriam goes pale. “And when he tries, we arrest him.”

There’s an access road off the side of the Verger estate where a car can be hidden away from view of the main drive, but also from sight of the regular security patrol. It’s there in the dark that Will backs his Volvo up behind a copse of brush and turns off the lights.

He crouches in the snow to lace his boots tightly. His hair is pulled up into a perfunctory bun, concealed beneath a winter hat. He’s left Hannibal’s coat at home tonight—only in flannel leggings and a hooded sweatshirt. He’s cold down to his bones, but his clothes are mobile and lightweight, and that’s all that matters as he walks carefully down the path, the moon above his only light.

There’s precious little sound in the winter night but for the sound of his own breath, the crunch of ice beneath his feet. Will moves as silently as he’s able, but with the recent hard freeze, there’s only so much that can be done. He walks in the tire tracks of the security’s four-wheelers, ears peeled for the sound of approaching motors, even though he knows he’s timed this between shift changes, and there is no one out to disturb him.

He passes the barn; the stench and sound of pigs covers any racket Will could make. He knows Mason is usually the last to check on the swine each night; Margot, the first each morning to tend to the horses. He wonders if that’s changed in the wake of her injury. Probably not—whether or not she can

ride in her state, Will knows it would take hell and high water to separate her from her show horse. Margot's an equestrian enthusiast through and through.

The road from the barn to the main house is the swiftest path, but not the only. Will skirts around the edge of the trees through the cross-country trail until he's brought to the enormous stone structure on the hill. Once a historic fort that allowed an advantageous line of sight for the lords of the area, it's now the ancestral home of the deeply-American Verger dynasty.

Will's knowledge of the grounds is unparalleled. It was, after all, once his job to know them and maintain them. Long haired, bare-footed, to tend to every wayward engine and broken fence, to know the ins and outs of every gate and trampled trail.

And as he hears the distant, unexpected hum of an advancing security vehicle, that knowledge is his advantage now. Despite the nervous pounding of his heart, it's what informs each instinctive fitting of his freezing hands into the trellis woven with dead ivy, each catch of his foot against familiar jutting, broken bricks. It's what used to carry him to Margot's bedroom on warm summer evenings for them to read ghost stories and for her to teach him how to put on foundation; so much less a fairytale than it was a tale of friendship between a princess and a pauper. Two lonely, ostracized teens finding a confidant in one another. Now, those memories are his lifeline.

Will grips hard to the windowsill and braces his feet. Doesn't think about the distance below as he tenses his muscles and reaches up to knock once, twice, thrice—and the consequences of what should happen if he falls. Or worse, is seen.

The window opens first. Margot's wide, horrified eyes stare out at him as she frantically whispers, *"Will?!"*

God, his fingers are freezing. "Are you gonna let me in or what?" Will hisses.

"Jesus." With her good hand, Margot grabs him by the collar like a wayward pup, hauling him up by the scruff. Will cringes at how it drags his sweatshirt against his wound, but scrabbles in regardless.

"What the *hell* are you doing?" Margot demands quietly. "My god, you *know* Daddy blacklisted you from the grounds—you could get *arrested* —"

"I was worried about you," Will half-lies, and tumbles in onto her floor. Lies on his back, wheezing for breath. Shit, it's cold, but he made it without getting caught. And if he can make it to the house and back out again undetected, he can certainly get in and out of the barn. "After the other night—"

"You could have just *called,* and—oh my god, what happened to your *neck?"* Margot's eyes are wide and so green, locked on the side of Will's throat.

Will, already flushed from his exertions, at least can't get any more red in the face. He reaches up to touch the mark, his fingers drifting along the rough and jagged scabs. He's been leaving his hair down lately to conceal it, but for the purpose of this exercise, it simply wasn't practical. "I, uh. We got a bit carried away."

Margot crouches at his side; she's lovely as ever, bundled in silk pajama pants and a plush robe. Her hair's wet, but Will's glad to note that her cast looks completely dry. Her fingertips hover just shy of his own, reluctant to touch for fear of hurting him. Ha—like she could. "You look like you got mauled."

“It’s not actually that bad,” Will mumbles, and rolls onto his belly. Sprawls across the lush carpet and does his best to temper his breathing and shield himself from her judgement all at once. He’s not actually sure how successful he is. Will pushes himself up, sits back on his haunches and drags the hat off. God, now that he’s in and it’s warm, his body is overcompensating and he’s getting overheated. He runs a hand back through his bangs, sweat-damp. His skin burns cold through the fleece. “I came to check on you.”

Margot huffs and sits on the edge of her opulent bed, the princess-style canopy soft and gauzy around her. It’s almost little-girlish, in a way that speaks to the fact that her room has been this way as long as Will’s known her. Designed for her as a child and never changed. Never *allowed* to change as she matured. And here she sits, the image of her father’s perfect little girl who never grew past age thirteen. A fully-grown woman in her own right, wrapped in fluff and shiny stuff, with an ancient blood-borne goddess behind the shields of her eyes that thirsts for a proper sacrifice. Her father refuses to see it, but Margot is as Verger as the rest of them, though she’s rarely given the opportunity to be as shrewd as she is. It’s with that shrewdness that she says, “Bullshit. You’re up to something.”

“Who says?” Will pants. Of course she took one look and *knew.* Margot’s survived on learning to read people with split-second glances.

“I say. Cut the shit. You know better than to be anywhere near here, so why *are* you?” Her eyes narrow, arms crossed, manicured fingers tapping soundlessly at the plush sleeves of her robe. The cogs turn in her gaze. “I know you’d have a better plan than relying on me to open my window if this were about Mason.”

“So maybe it’s not about Mason.” Will huffs and rolls his neck. Stands, and glances surreptitiously out the window as the headlights of the security vehicle disappear into the dark.

“Will, do me a favor and assume I’m not an idiot, and I’ll assume you’re not one, either.”

He turns to face her with a heavy sigh—their eyes meet in the middle, both of them caught off-guard. Neither of them prepared for this particular interaction, but here regardless. He has a choice: he can be honest and risk her wrath, or lie and risk her friendship. Or he can try to find a safe, common ground somewhere in the middle.

“I’m not here about Mason,” Will says. Licks his lips. “...not tonight, anyway.”

Margot’s lips thin. She sighs through her nose. “Security changed their rounds. They edged back shift change by fifteen minutes.”

Of course. It makes sense to keep things unpredictable. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“For next time?”

“For when it’s needed.” Will tips his head to the side. Meets her eyes. “He’s not here tonight.”

“No.” Inhale. Hold. Exhale. Margot’s shoulders slump, and she rubs at her eyes with the back of her good hand. “They’re not due back for another hour.”

“If it’s any consolation, I really didn’t have any plans for him tonight,” Will replies honestly. He turns to her with a heavy sigh, and glances at the bed beside her. At her nod, he approaches and sits. Reaches out and rests his hand on her shoulder; lifts his hand to her jaw, and she bares his neck, her bruises to his eyes. They’re healing, but they’re no less unsightly. Will’s teeth clench and release. “How has he been the last few days?”

Margot lifts and drops one shoulder in a shrug. “He’s Mason.” A long-suffering sigh. “But Daddy’s had him out of the house. There’s some big agriculture show, and a potential merger with a smaller farm he wants to overtake. You know. Stuff I’m not allowed to know about because it’s a man’s work, which conveniently keeps him away from me. I can’t decide if that’s better or worse.”

“Let’s agree it’s better,” he mutters darkly, and lets his hand fall away. “And Alana?”

At that, Margot’s countenance softens. She casts a glance to her phone on her bedside table. “She’s amazing. But I can’t let her come over here, and I’ve basically been put on house arrest, so we’re stuck talking via text.”

“Why house arrest?”

“Probably because I’m a lesbian who’s too old for conversation therapy.” Margot sighs quietly. Her eyes are far away. “He’s always regretted not putting me through it. That was the most decent thing your father ever did for me.” Lifts her eyes to Will, huge and shiny with regret. “What he said to Daddy about him using you and me as a scapegoat for his sins. That we’re all made in the image of the Lord, exactly as we are. I never got a chance to pay him back, and he lost everything.”

“He’d do it again,” Will says firmly. “For both of us.”

A small, weak smile. “I wish he didn’t have to.”

And one of his own when Will reaches for her hand and says, “Yeah, me too.”

But then—

Wheels crackling on the drive. The flash of headlights across the wall. Margot’s pupils shrink to pinpricks and her lips part in silent horror. “They’re back. They’re not supposed to be back.”

“Shit,” Will hisses, and dives for the window. Wrenches at it—*“Fuck,* it’s stuck.”

“Mar–*got!”*

“Fuck!” Margot snaps. Turns in place, frantic.

Will’s heart pounds in his throat. Shit, if he gets caught here, he’ll never have another chance. He’ll be arrested for trespassing, documented as an intruder, and if anything should ever happen to Mason after the threats Will’s made, he’ll be public enemy number one.

It’ll all be for nothing.

We can’t let this go to waste.

“Move,” Will whispers, and dodges past her toward the opulent walk-in closet. Keeps the lights off and quiets his steps as he hears footsteps on the stairs.

It’s not enough.

Day dresses and casual wear on one side, her equestrian clothing on the other. Shoes stacked in cubicles from floor to ceiling. But in the very back, two mirrored doors that fold over a sub-closet that contains each individually-wrapped gown, bagged and tagged from the dry cleaners like bodies in a morgue.

Will opens it and ducks inside, folding himself behind plastic and fabric and tries not to breathe as he pulls the door closed behind him. Even the movement of his lungs could set off the sound of rustling clingwrap, and—shit, this was a really bad idea.

"What are you doing, Margot?" Mason's voice is nasal, that annoying little sing-song he does with her name that makes it roll repulsively from his tongue. "Talking to someone?"

"No," she replies, muffled by the barriers between them, but audibly sullen. "Who would I have to talk to? You've scared away all my friends."

Mason *tsks*. "Surely not *all* your friends, hmm?" Will doesn't hear what she says, if she says anything. But what comes next is a mocking, sickening, "Aww, baby sister. *Well.* Then they don't know anything about loyalty, do they? Not like you and I do. And family has to stick together, right? It's all we have in the end. You and me, baby."

A shuddering breath. "Get off me."

Bile licks at the base of Will's throat. His heart speeds in his chest, but it feels cold. Mason wouldn't —?

"Shh, just—"

A gasp, pained. Margot's. "No. Mason, stop. I mean it."

Will's nails dig into his palms. Red flashes in his eyes. God. *God.*

A hiss, a snarl. A whimper, and Will's blood goes from cold to hot in a second.

Fuck it. If he has to kill Mason Verger tonight with his hands, he'll do it—

Slap. "I said get *off of me!"*

"What the hell is going on here?"

A shuddering breath on the verge of tears. "Daddy."

And then fury.

"What in the Lord's name did I say to you, boy?!" Molson Verger roars. "I said it ain't right. You get your ass downstairs before I ship you off! I don't want to see you anywhere near this room or I'll tan your ass, you hear me?!"

"Sorry, Pops—"

"Shut your mouth and get out of my sight."

The scramble of feet descending. The pounding of Will's blood in his ears. Margot's shivering, shuddering gasps.

"He don't mean nothin' by it, Margot," Molson says. "Boys his age do whatever crosses their mind. Mason's a go-getter; a born Verger. And if you were assertive as Mason in standing up for yourself against him, you'd be a born Verger, too. Not a bred Verger like your mother. So you shape up, you hear?"

Silence, suspended on Will's nameless horror.

"Well?" Molson demands.

"Sorry, Daddy," Margot whispers. "He didn't mean nothin' by it, I know."

"There's a good girl. Now you get to bed."

"Yes, Daddy."

"Goodnight, Princess."

The door closes, and a handful of moments pass before Margot sniffles and lets out a tremulous, defeated sound.

"Well," she says softly. "Might as well come out."

Will's not sure that if he comes out he won't immediately head downstairs for the knife block. He gulps breath like he's drowning. His hands shake. Horror churns his stomach. He—

The door opens. Margot stands before him, clutching the lapels of her robe close to her body with her broken arm. Her eyes are red, watery. There's three raised lines on the side of her jaw and neck. Nail marks. Her ponytail is askew.

Will reaches for her and she flinches, but she holds still as he cups her face in his palms. Steps out of the bureau. Smooths his hands back over her hair and draws her into his arms. Holds her tight, like he could shield her from the blood that runs in her veins if he were strong enough.

He will be. He *will* be.

"I'm going to kill him, Margot," Will confesses against her temple. Her shoulders lurch with an aborted sob. "I promise you, I will."

She trembles, shaken to her foundations. But when she speaks, it's not with fear, but with horrified fury. A goddess debased. Violated. Unhinged.

"Just tell me when and where," she hisses. "Whatever I need to do, I'll do it. I'll help you."

Chapter End Notes

*

This chapter deals with Mason and sexual harrassment/borderline assault on Margot, as well as Margot being gaslit by her father. It *is* interrupted quickly, but I feel obligated to warn you that though it goes nowhere, it is sexual-esque and predatory in nature, and anyone who is bothered by such content can read the first portion of the scene, and skip to the end upon Mason's entrance. Just know that it's there and it happens, and he is stopped, but rest assured that this *is* the maximum extent that I will showcase Mason's violence in the fic. I'm done with him... for now.

3:6

Chapter Notes

> Well, despite my mixed thoughts about posting this all at once, I'm deciding that my yeet is valid and I'm just gonna do it. Here, take it. I'm replying to comments shortly, which has been made MUCH EASIER now that my inbox is fixed.
>
> And if anyone wants a mood for this chapter, check out Hozier's new song, Dinner and Diatribes. And maybe don't read it in public.
>
> And PLEASE check out the absolutely incredible sketch by @wholeanddeadly on Twitter of Will(helmina) based off some bb!Dancy edits I did!!

The bathroom is hot, humid. The air circulates only from the window Will cracked open before he began. The tub is full of water warm enough to pinken his skin; Will's laptop is open and sitting on the closed toilet seat. His leg hangs out over the side, too long to fit as he gently draws the razor around the delicate bones of his ankle. Shaving is a chore, but that's the last of it—he hasn't bothered for a while, but he's found the routine to be helpful in getting him into a certain mindset.

Namely, the one he and Wilhelmina share.

He can't call it solely hers anymore—for indeed, Will now finds himself living there more often than not, and though she feels like a sister that lives inside his skin, her impulses are no longer something to entirely ignore, or to entirely indulge. Instead, Will's actions are a matter of temperance between the two. Her ideas filtered, moderated, and applied by Will's consciousness to a place where they're both satisfied with the outcome.

He's changed. And as Will slumps back into the water and allows it to lap around his narrow shoulders, folding his legs back beneath the scented water, he is satisfied with that change.

The feminine comes easier, now. So, too does his embracing of the masculine in its wake. The line he walks is one that can switch from day to day, but one that is solely his. There's no need to worry anymore for the thoughts of others. Hannibal accepts him as he is. *Wants* him as he is.

Will has almost everything he could want. Almost.

He sighs and leans forward; shakes one hand dry and uses the trackpad to scroll down. Colors, options. Price tags. He tells himself that it's not an indulgence *solely* for his own sake, and so it's worth it. It *is*.

Laughs, and it echoes from old, yellowed tile. Of course, if Hannibal knew what Will was looking at, he'd surely offer to buy it himself—which is all the more reason why it's better off as a surprise.

Add to Cart

Checkout

Will smiles to himself and touches his neck; the place just behind his ear, right at the hairline. The scabs have finally gone, and left newly-healed red flesh in their wake. It's still an unmistakable mark to bear, but Will wears it proudly, especially in the comfort of his own home.

Order Confirmed

Will closes the lid of his laptop just as his phone begins to ring—the black one, with a familiar caller ID on the screen. Will's grin widens as he swipes to answer and puts it on speaker. "Hi."

"Good evening, beloved. How are you?"

"Mm," Will murmurs, and his eyes flutter closed as he basks in the warmth. Imagines arms around him, a body at his back. Hands on his thighs, a mouth on his neck. "I am… very relaxed. You?"

"Suddenly finding myself quite intrigued."

Will laughs and rests his cheek against the side of the fiberglass tub. His toes are starting to prune, which probably means his nails are nearly soft enough to manicure and pedicure. The little things. "Don't worry, I'm boring as ever. I'm in the bath."

"That doesn't sound very boring at all," Hannibal purrs. *"Any reason in particular, or simply an indulgence?"*

"Indulgence can be a reason," Will replies with a private smile, and knows Hannibal will hear the edge of flirtation in his voice. Takes a breath, and sighs his contentment, if with some remorse that the tub isn't quite large enough to suit his height. Perhaps next time he can suggest taking advantage of Hannibal's.

Or taking advantage *of* Hannibal, as it may turn out. Will grins smugly at the thought.

"You're so very right. How foolish of me."

"Though the company could be better." Will drags his fingers across the surface, satisfied when he hears Hannibal's soft exhalation. He spreads his fingers wide. His palm floats on the water, hazy with fragrant bath soap that smells faintly of artificial vanilla. He admits (though it hardly feels like an admission, rather than a statement of the obvious), "I miss you."

It's been more than a week since they last saw one another, and Will is getting restless with it. His body aches for Hannibal's touch, and even their nightly phone calls aren't enough to satisfy. Whispers and whimpers and his own hand simply can't compare.

"I miss you, too." A considering, wanting hum. *"How are your assignments?"*

"Slow-going. Boring as hell." The only meeting he's had with Gideon since is not much better. After all, other than listening to his woes, Will doesn't yet have anything to offer. Playing a quadruple-agent is exhausting. Will huffs and sits up, cross-legged. Tendrils of hair drip down the back of his neck where they were wetted with the bathwater. The rest is fuzzy, piled atop his head. "I'm just about ready to call it quits on this whole education thing. With or without a degree, I think I just about have enough experience to get freelance gigs for a lifetime." And that might be an understatement. He arches his back and makes a sound of satisfaction when it pops. "How's your shoulder?"

“Newly healed, but somewhat visible.” A breath. *“And your neck?”*

Will rolls his lower lips between his teeth and softly, gently sighs. “Raw. Distinctive.” A quiet, breathless laugh. “Good. Really good.” And then that laugh catches in his throat, and Will suddenly finds himself silent. He licks his lips. “...wanna see?”

For just a moment, Hannibal, too, has nothing to say. But then, *“Yes. I’d like that.”*

“Okay, hold on.” Will hits the home button and pulls up his camera with damp fingers. He leans bodily over the side of the tub, careful to make sure it’s well and clear of the water should he fumble. Inverts the camera. Arches his neck until he can see the dark impressions of Hannibal’s teeth, the damp curls plastered to pale skin. Exhales. *Snap.*

God, it’s… *sensual.* Most of his face is out of frame, but his lips are parted, showing the barest glimpse of teeth. Bare neck, bare shoulders, bare, smooth chest. The indistinct, out-of-focus blur of his hips below the water. A stark, bold impression of where Hannibal bit him, clearly healing well, but unmistakable. Unforgettable.

Will’s breath catches as he hits home again and pulls up their thread of texts, attaches the photo, and doesn’t think before he hits *send.* “There.”

He hears the buzz of Hannibal receiving the message over the speaker. A click. A breath, and.

Hannibal swallows. Licks his lips. Fuck, Will can… *hear* it. And he can no more suppress his smug and self-satisfied grin than he can stop his heart from skipping a beat.

“You are a force of destruction. Do you know that?”

Will laughs, barely louder than an amused chuff of breath. Hums his amusement, his pleasure, and purrs, “I could stand to hear it more often.”

“The more often I see you, the more often I’ll have to tell you. Therefore it stands to reason that if you lived nearer, or if we saw each other more often, you’d hear it with greater frequency.”

Will’s mouth splits on a grin. He sighs, and fishes for the drain plug. “That’s a roundabout way to ask when you’re gonna see me again.”

“So when will I see you again?”

“Better,” Will replies warmly. “Much better.”

He pulls the plug and stands; would normally prefer to rinse off, but that would require hanging up, and he figures he’s as clean as he can reasonably expect to be, seeing as he wasn’t particularly dirty to begin with. Will draws a towel around his body and steps onto the bath mat; heads for the living room, where his pajamas are laid out over the sleeper sofa.

And there he pauses. Looks up, to the old, curtained windows. To his cast iron wood stove. To Winston, sleeping on the rug. This quaint place that has seen the latter years of his teens. This transitory space that was the stepping stone between his life with his father and his life with Hannibal.

Will’s toes curl. He takes a breath. “Actually. If you wanted to, I’m… free this weekend. Rifle season is almost over.” He leaves the suggestion open-ended, the question unasked.

They could hunt together. The two of them.

“Is that an official invitation?”

Will pitches his voice low, warm. “You were the one complaining you haven’t been here. Yes, this is me extending the invitation. You can see me in my natural habitat, all its country glory.”

And as soon as he says it, his jaw clenches. Will glances down and is paralyzed by the reality, the *disparity* in how they live.

Jesus. He can’t ask Hannibal to sleep on a fucking *couch.* Which means he’ll have to—

“Then I’d be happy to accept,” Hannibal replies, and sounds really and truly pleased. His voice drops, pitched low and intimate. *“I’m afraid you’ve spoiled me. It’s been far too long.”*

“Not much longer,” Will murmurs, and swallows down his nervous heart. “And if *your* invitation is still open for winter break…”

Hannibal makes a quiet, eager sound. *“Yes, of course.”*

“Good.” Will takes a breath, and says again, “Good. Then we’ll be together soon, and you’ll be sick of me before you know it.”

“Never, Will,” Hannibal says softly. *“Not if I saw you every day for the rest of my life.”*

Joy is a strange sensation. It holds a similar place alongside fear. Both are equally strong, equally thick in Will’s mouth as he whispers the prayer, “I’ll hold you to that.”

Though there is nothing illicit about the photograph in theory, it seems somehow scandalous that Hannibal has not yet deleted it. And yet, he can’t seem to stop glancing at it throughout the day, and finding his eyes lingering on new details each time.

Not just the marks of his teeth in Will’s flesh, but the creamy color of his skin. The otherwise austere column of his throat. The angle of his jaw. Even just the color of his bitten-pink mouth is sinful enough that he can hardly tear his attention away.

What a delightfully indulgent little creature he’s captured for his own. And how very fortunate is he that Will seems cheerfully and viciously determined to keep him in return.

Not for the first time, Hannibal thanks the multifaceted strains of the universe that he and Will’s anonymous suitor are one and the same. He cannot imagine a reality in which he has to fight for Will’s attention. Even the thought of having to receive Will’s missives from afar, without being able to touch—

No. This reality is unreasonably kind to a man such as him, and he treasures the imbalances of the fates that allows it to be so. If God is a cruel creature rewarding those like him for overcoming their trials and tribulations, then Hannibal is the most ruthless warrior to walk the Earth, and is vindicated by such.

Will belongs to him, *with* him, and would abide no one else.

“You never struck me as the type to be glued to your phone, Doc,” drawls an amused, familiar voice. “Color me surprised.”

Hannibal glances up from the break room table and minimizes the app. Caught red-handed. Of course, he can play it off and no one will know differently. He raises a brow and offers a slight smile. “Abel. You’re looking well.”

“Diet and exercise do the brain and body right, or so my wife says.” A wry smile. Gideon sits across from Hannibal without asking for invitation, but Hannibal figures they’re familiar enough for it to be acceptable without quite crossing the threshold of rude… *quite.* “It seems we’re always on opposite shifts.”

Hannibal flashes him a smile in return. “I’m afraid it makes sense for the hospital to keep their competent staff in opposite rotation. An unfortunate reality of our social lives.”

Abel laughs. “You flatter me.” He’s still smiling to himself as he unzips his lunch bag, and manages to mostly-suppress a grimace at the salad he’s packed—or *been* packed. It would likely escape the notice of most others’ eyes.

Hannibal is not most others. “Not to your taste?”

Gideon shows his teeth, but this one’s not quite a grin. “I’m a comfort food man, myself. But I need to make sure I fit in my tux.”

A noise of amusement and assent. “You cut a rather nice figure just a few weeks ago. Surely you have nothing to worry about.”

He would expect it to draw a laugh. Instead, there is only a glimmer of something approaching a storm as Gideon sits back in his seat and violently spears romaine on his fork and says, “Tell that to Annalise.” Perhaps Hannibal looks at him for a moment too long, because his expression seems to smooth, and he sighs. “It’s not all bad. It really is helping.” He wrinkles his nose, back to his joker-persona. “I just miss steak.”

“All things in moderation,” Hannibal replies with a curious tilt to his head. “Perhaps you and your wife can compromise a suitable diet model that accommodates both of your tastes. Steak cesar salad, perhaps.”

Gideon frowns thoughtfully. Elbows on the table, he sets his chin in his palm as he glances down at his meal and ruminates on Hannibal’s words. Thankfully, he keeps his mouth shut for the duration of the time he chews and swallows. “You know,” he says eventually. “That’s not a half-bad idea.” Looks up at Hannibal. “You’d make a decent counselor.”

“A happy coincidence, then, that I’m changing my residency to Psychiatry,” Hannibal replies.

Gideon’s brows shoot up. His eyes widen. *“Really,* now—”

It happens in an instant; the door swings open and bounces off the wall, and back into the frantically-pacing form of a tall and twitchy man who seems quite beside himself. Hannibal silently gives thanks for his good fortune.

Chilton. And he appears *quite* distraught.

“Good afternoon,” Hannibal offers cheerfully but cautiously, as one might when they’re uncertain of a colleague’s distress. “Are you quite alright, Frederick?”

“No, I am *not* alright, Doctor Lecter, thank-you-very-much.” Frederick sits in a huff, but there is a frenetic and manic edge to his gaze. His leg bounces irritably, and one hand clamps over his mouth. He exhales hard through his nose.

“Need a Xanax?” Abel asks warily, but sympathetically.

“No,” Frederick replies. He’s fretful. Covers his face with his hands. Looks up again. “It appears some of my confidential notes have gone… missing.”

“Missing?” Hannibal asks, appropriately concerned. “Surely not misplaced—”

“No, I haven’t moved them,” Chilton says in an abrupt, irritable hurry. “I didn’t touch them. It wasn’t me. But they’re certainly not there, and that means someone took them, and they were very important to my research—”

“Have you contacted security?” Hannibal asks with a frown. He glances at Abel, who shares a wary look, before they turn their attention back to Frederick. “I was accosted by a misguided student some weeks back in a security violation, seeking to slander one of their classmates. As far as I know, nothing was noted missing, but—”

“Classmate?” Frederick asks. His head snaps up, a terrier catching the scent of a rat. A small opportunistic carnivore chasing small prey. “You wouldn’t happen to know the name?”

Hannibal offers a small, perplexed frown. “Yes, of course,” he replies, the facsimile of unsuspecting confusion. “The co-ed’s name was Freddie Lounds, and she came to me with her altogether unfounded concerns about my partner, Will Graham.”

“Your—your *partner?”* Chilton sputters. His eyes are wide, huge, as he looks between Hannibal and Gideon beside him, as though expecting a similar state of gracelessness.

Abel, for his part, knows very well of the relationship between them. He simply raises a brow. “Yeah. Graham. Nice kid. They were at the, uh,” he waves his hand vaguely, searching for the word. “The Symphony thing with you, right, Hannibal?”

Hannibal notes the careful avoidance of Will’s pronouns. It’s surprisingly astute. He makes a mental note. “Yes. Will has become something of a permanent fixture in my life.” He blinks, all false-innocence. “Frederick, you don’t look well. Are you sure you’re alright?”

“Freddie Lounds, you say?” Frederick’s energy has reached the point of raw mania. His eyes blaze like a horse fighting the bit, hoping to kick out at anything and everything to get his way. “I’ll have to take this up with security.”

“As you should,” Hannibal replies with a concerned frown. “To the best of my knowledge, Freddie runs something of a tabloid news blog that borders on sensationalist. It was my belief at the time that she was writing a piece about slanderous and unsubstantiated diagnoses against Will as something of a personal vendetta dating back to their early undergrad rivalry. I found it altogether inappropriate, illegal, and distasteful, and reported the intrusion to hospital security. It was my understanding she’s been blacklisted for privacy violations.” A faint frown. “Though I’m not sure what business she would have had in your office, but the timing seems awfully coincidental to not at least be considered.”

Frederick is on his feet in a moment, the light of new fury in his eyes. “Thank you, Doctor Lecter, this has been *most* helpful.”

“Happy to assist, of course.” Hannibal blinks, the perfect image of a perplexed man who is not quite sure of the rapid turn of events his afternoon has taken. “If there’s anything I can do to help, please let me know—especially as it pertains to Will.”

“I will certainly do that.”

There is deep, deep amusement in Hannibal’s chest as Frederick blusters away, path uncharted and uncertain as a tumbleweed blowing through the hospital break room. Oh, Frederick. Some things really never change—

“What’s all this?” Gideon mutters, brow creased. “Some rivalry gone bad, or—?”

Hannibal feigns a helpless shrug. “It appears to me almost entirely one-sided. On multiple occasions, Freddie Lounds has gone out of her way to try to besmirch my opinion of Will’s reputation. But Will seems unperturbed, so I’ve largely stayed out of it.” Hannibal frowns down at the dark screen of his phone, falsely contemplative. “It seems these things have gotten much more serious since I was in school, I’m afraid. Though back then, we simply focused on ruining one-another’s flash cards. Accidentally, of course.”

A wry twist of his mouth has Abel barking out laughter, loud and raucous. “Hear-hear. Jesus, kids these days really are out to ruin each others’ whole damn *lives.”*

“Well, hopefully the matter will be solved swiftly and decisively,” Hannibal murmurs. He slips his phone into his pocket, and meets Abel’s eyes with an understated, privately fond smile. “Will and I have more important things on our minds than a college-level stalker.”

Gideon’s eyes flash in the fluorescent light, and he chuckles under his breath. Spears another bite of his meatless salad, and chews thoroughly. “I hear that.”

He peels the plastic back off the bed for the first time in almost three years.

Winston sneezes and retreats downstairs, and that’s as far as the moral support goes.

The memories are at the forefront of his mind as Will does laundry, cleans the sheets, vacuums the room. He’s always bought the same damn brand of detergent his dad used to. When it comes out of the dryer, everything smells the same, and for an hour or so, he has to walk away.

He comes back to it, though, because he has to. Because there’s a fundamental divide in his mind between *Hannibal* and *sleeper sofa,* between *Baltimore, Maryland* and *Wolf Trap, Virginia.* There’s a good, solid chunk of him that can’t imagine those things colliding, and so he has to keep on with his chores, because the inevitability is that Hannibal *is* coming, and Will is *not* going to put him on the couch. Not even at his side.

So he cleans. He cleans and he dusts and he does the wash, chases spiders from the corners and wipes the tiny windows down with windex on the free newspaper circulars that get stuffed in his mailbox, full of the same fifty houses that have been on the market for as long as he’s lived here.

Nothing really changes in Wolf Trap. Not until you leave, like Will has started to leave. And very precious little ever gets introduced that’s *new.*

In fact, the last new thing around here was Will, and three years later, the whole damn *state's* still not used to him sticking around.

He moves everything upstairs. It feels unnatural to put his things in his father's closet, in the dresser that smells like moth balls. Will even lights candles and sprays perfume that makes *him* sneeze, but it doesn't quite chase the scent of dust from the room, or the motes from the sunbeams that come through the single-pane windows. He moves everything except for himself, clinging stubbornly to his ground-floor bed, with all his possessions spirited out of the way.

It's not like sleeping in Hannibal's room. That room belongs to him, and is a domain for he and Will to share. But the room upstairs in Wolf Trap is full of ghosts, and Will can't stand the way they whisper.

Every time he crosses the threshold, he can tell the room's not his. Maybe it's just because he lives here, but it just… doesn't feel *lived in.* Not like the downstairs is clearly Will's *living room,* with furrows worn into the floor from Winston's untrimmed nails, like rings on the thrift-store table from old coffee mugs, chipped coasters that are mismatched and scratched and marked with imprints of dried red wine. Not like gouges in the walls from the corners of his fishing cooler catching the threshold wrong as he wheels it over, or the salt stains in the entryway from his boots that weren't quite clean when he came in. Little things like that, that make a house a home.

Will doesn't have those things upstairs.

Nor, he realizes quietly, does he have those things at Hannibal's house. But there are enough *memories* at Hannibal's house to fill each and every one of those gaps.

And he has Hannibal to fill the rest.

So it stands to reason that maybe having Hannibal will fill that empty space here, too. There hasn't been a single thing for Will that Hannibal hasn't found some way to fix, whether with reason or compromise.

And if he can't, then…

Then maybe Will's just not meant to fit here anymore.

And if that's true, well—if only for a weekend, it's just one more thing to fake.

When he said they'd see each other that weekend, Will meant it. But then the package arrives, and he can really only be expected to be so strong.

Panties are one thing. Even the soft, body-hugging bralettes and satin camisoles felt like pushing it. But as he stands before his full-length mirror and rolls the delicate nylons over his calves, his knees, his thighs; clips the garters to the lace bands at the top of the stockings, Will's breath catches. The snugness of the belt around his waist tucks it into a subtle curve. The connecting thong is solid black in front, a panel that's barely enough to conceal the soft shape of his cock, with two straps at the waistband that sit above and below the ridges of his hips, all held up together by the tension of the

belt and oh, God. The bralette is simpler—separate satin panels that are held together by a band of lace around his ribs, and straps that criss-cross over his sternum. Sexy. Comfortable.

And this set isn't the only.

Impulse guided his hand to get him here—a flare of confidence better characterized to Wilhelmina's influence. And that's all well and good, and Will could easily put these away and not think about them, but.

But.

The clock reads almost six already. That would put him in Baltimore late, but not so late as to be unheard of.

He grabs his phone and presses dial. His heart times itself to the ringing of the line. For a moment he thinks it'll go to voicemail, and the impulse will be forcibly quashed, but—

"This is Doctor Lecter."

The hard edge to his voice has Will's tongue touching the back of his teeth. It's… unnervingly sexy. Is this what Hannibal sounds like to everyone that isn't him? He swallows. Exhales in a short, sharp, breathy laugh. "Doctor Lecter, huh?"

Hannibal's tone changes immediately. *"Will—my apologies, I answered without checking the caller ID; I thought I was going to miss it. I'm just getting out of surgery."* A shuffle of sound; the closing of a door. Footsteps. *"Is everything alright?"*

"Yeah, of course," Will murmurs. Sits on the edge of his bed. His teeth sink into his lower lip, and he leans back until he's flat on the mattress, legs crossed at the ankles, feet touching the floor. "I was just wondering what you're doing tonight."

"Tonight?" Will can hear the sound of his perplexed frown—but also the note of curiosity. He's always curious about the unexpected. It's how Will knows he's going to get his way. *"I didn't have anything planned. My shift ends at eight."*

"Did you already eat?"

A pause. *"I haven't, no. Why do you ask?"*

"I know it's last minute," Will says, and pitches his voice low, soft, enticing. "But I was thinking about what you said a while back, about how we should go out more. And it's been a while since I've seen you, and last time we had lunch we had, uh, other things on our mind."

Because you wanted me distracted, he doesn't say.

"So I was thinking, maybe if it's not too late and you're not too tired, I could meet you at the hospital and we could go somewhere."

Silence.

Will gives it a moment. And then he inhales, and a frisson of doubt clutches around his heart, though he does his best to sound confident when he adds, "I just. Miss you. And I'm impatient. But if tonight doesn't work—"

“Tonight is just fine, Will,” Hannibal replies, warm and gently exasperated. *“If you’d like to meet me here, I’d love to see you—though I’ll admit, you’ve surprised me. But I should have clothing that’s suitable in my go bag, presuming it’s not too wrinkled, and I can shower here at the hospital, since I’m sure you wouldn’t appreciate the scent of rubbing alcohol and iodine.”*

Will smiles to himself. “There are worse things to deal with.”

A short laugh. *“Undoubtedly.”* A considering sound. *“Did you have anywhere in mind?”*

“No idea in the slightest,” Will says, lashes lowering as he gazes up at the ceiling and imagines what Hannibal must look like now, exhausted from hours of work. If Will were kinder, he’d let Hannibal go home and rest at the end of his shift—but when he thinks about the hours of sleep he lost to fears of the Ripper, he certainly feels less guilty about demanding recompense. “I don’t even know what’s in Baltimore. I’m completely at the mercy of your whims. My only ransom demand is seeing you.”

Hannibal laughs again, this one far more humored and genuine. His exhaustion is fading, giving way to his affection for Will. *“Ransom demand. Is this a hostage situation?”*

Will licks his lips. He grins. “Oh, no doubt.”

An intrigued sound. A pause. His instincts kick in—the very ones he’s trained to regard Will as someone he trusts, and not a threat. He’s right on one count, wrong on the other. *“What are you up to?”*

Will laughs. His head tips back, jaws open, teeth exposed in a wolf’s grin. Elastic and lace bite into his skin, grip him like lithe fingers, broad palms. *Soon.* “I guess you’ll have to find out.”

Hannibal growls quietly into his ear; the sound makes Will shiver. *“If I had more time, I would have made more comprehensive plans. There are much finer restaurants in Washington.”*

“Maybe I wanna keep you on your toes,” Will murmurs. “I’m sure you’ll figure something out.”

A huff, amused and fond and intrigued, all. *“You’ve become quite the menace, haven’t you?”*

“You have no idea,” Will purrs. Feels the slip of nylon as his thighs brush together, and exhales a breathy sigh. A hum. And he smiles—pulls the phone from his ear with his finger hovering over the disconnect button, and says, “See you soon, baby.”

And hangs up.

Over the time they have known one another, Will has learned there’s a certain level of drama that Hannibal appreciates in his life. Showmanship. But also challenge. As a man like Hannibal is wont to be, he is suspicious of anything that comes too easily to him without what he considers to be the appropriate amount of effort.

Looking back, Will is quite certain that the reason Hannibal was intrigued by him is because, from day one, he was determined by nature not to make anything easy. It gave Hannibal a target; a race to run, quarry to chase. It’s a gambit that he still believes he’s running, unaware that Will has passed him

and is waiting to ambush him at the finish line. He's been so used to winning that he never considered anyone else could get ahead.

And Will likes being ahead. He likes the view.

It's for that reason that he arrives just before eight, before Hannibal could reasonably expected to be ready, and parks well out of sight. Then, careless of the cold, Will seeks out the Bentley in the employee parking section and leans against the immaculate rear bumper. His hair is loose around his face and shoulders in perfect curls, soft and shiny with conditioner and product. He's put a lot into his appearance tonight in a way he hasn't since the early days of their flirtation—foundation and contour, jet black eyeliner and false lashes, rose blush and gold highlight and matte red lipstick the color of fresh blood. The same glossy black pumps he wears for media filming; a little black dress that slouches off one shoulder (and exposes a flash of a skinny lace strap), ruches and tucks to accentuate his waist, and has an airy, asymmetrical skirt that flutters around his knees.

Wrapped in Hannibal's oversized coat, dressed to the nines, Will knows he more resembles a lesser man's pinup fantasy than his usual self. But he's not here tonight to be himself. He's here tonight to indulge every passing whim that flits across his mind, every decadent fantasy of becoming what Wilhelmina would make of him—a perfect mate.

He's here tonight to take Hannibal to his knees, either literally or metaphorically, and will settle for nothing less. To make him fully aware that, in the process of tying Will to him, he has ensnared himself.

Step three.

Will pulls his phone from his pocket and rolls his shoulders back, picture-perfect relaxation. Even the cold can't touch him tonight.

>> I'll meet you at your car.

The garage is quiet this time of evening; visiting hours are nearly over, and the middle of the week tends to be less hectic than the weekend, when the teeming masses have more free time with which to get themselves into emergency situations. Despite the lack of planning, Will certainly could have chosen a worse night to spring unexpected plans on his beloved monster.

<< On my way.

He smiles. Leans back on his elbows, and crosses one ankle over the other, balancing precariously on one shoe. He feels dangerous tonight. Powerful. Wilhelmina is closer to the surface than she's ever been, seated comfortably inside his head and heart, gazing out from inside his eyes right alongside him. This is their night—one for a celebration of the mercilessly feminine, manicured french-tipped nails and all. A lovely lure waiting to hook the predator who dares to take a bite of something so fine.

And he will. Hell, he already has.

Will hears the distant sound of the automatic doors, footsteps descending into darkness. He's perfectly relaxed—after all, what does he have to be nervous about?

It's time to go on the offensive; a sensual onslaught with no holds barred.

He sees the shape of Hannibal before he sees his face, and his heart picks up. No doubt, no. No fear. Rather, keen anticipation of his reaction as he draws closer and—

He stops. Will relishes the moment that it clicks behind his eyes, and that blank and assessing gaze is replaced with stunned recognition. Oh, he loves this. Will tilts his head to the side, casual and careless, and his hair sweeps over his shoulder. He smiles, all teeth. “Evening, stranger.”

“Will.” His lips part. For Hannibal, it’s as good as a jaw-drop, and Will preens. Lifts his chin—shows a flash of his throat, but in the dark, with his hair down, with the high collar of the coat, he knows the bite is concealed. A tease, not an indulgence. Hannibal closes his mouth. Licks his lips, and swallows. “You look stunning.”

“Gee, thanks. Not so bad yourself,” Will teases. Holds out his hand, and Hannibal is drawn forward like a magnet to its pole. Their fingers lace together, bare skin and fine, soft leather.

“What’s the occasion?” There’s a faint pull between his brows; scanning his memory for something he may have forgotten and coming up short.

Will’s smile grows. “Do I need an occasion to get pretty for you?”

“No, of course not.” He huffs softly through his nose. “Though if there is one, I’d like to be prepared for it.”

“Mm. Well,” he murmurs, and reaches up—sees Hannibal pause, a near-imperceptible sway of his body as Will traces his thumb over Hannibal’s cheek. “My occasion is seeing you, and because I wanted to. How about that?”

Hannibal turns into the touch of Will’s hand; catches it with his own, and presses a kiss to Will’s palm. “Well, I certainly know better than to get in the way of anything you want.” Warm humor, but—“Your hands are freezing, my love. I hope you haven’t been waiting long.” He holds Will’s hand, but turns a gently scolding glance back on him. “You could have come inside.”

“You worry too much,” Will replies with a smile. “I’ve got pockets. And now I’ve got you.”

It’s totally a line; Hannibal’s amused huff is proof they both know it, but when Will tips his face up, he’s rewarded regardless. A slow kiss, savoring—one that turns into two, to three, to Will’s hands curling in the lapels of Hannibal’s woolen trench coat and dragging him close, to hands on his waist clutching, holding, and—

“We’ll miss our reservation,” Hannibal murmurs against his mouth. “I called in a favor with the head chef to get us in on short notice. It’s not far, but we should be going. It’d be rude to be late.”

Will slouches back against the Bentley. Is fully aware of how he looks as he pouts, artfully tousled and bright-eyed with desire. “Alright. Wouldn’t want to be rude,” he replies, breathless. “Manners maketh man.”

Hannibal’s palm slips to the small of his back, and he pulls Will to his feet, into his arms. Steals one last kiss like he simply can’t help it, then guides him to the passenger’s side. Pops the door, holds it open, and holds Will’s hand as he slips inside. A perfect predator in the shape of a gentleman.

And he’s mine, Will thinks—and Hannibal says, “Precisely.”

It's only a handful of blocks from Johns Hopkins to the Inner Harbor—a fact Hannibal acknowledges that, were it not winter, and were Will not in such *precarious footwear,* he would be more than happy to walk. Will rolls his eyes with fondness, but reaches over to squeeze his hand once in thanks. In truth, the cold is far more unpleasant than a pair of heels that's already broken in, but he'll accept chivalry where it's offered.

But as they park the Bentley and emerge onto street level, Will is struck silent at the play of city lights reflecting on the water; ice clinging to street lamps, a slight haze above the surface of the harbor. It absorbs and refracts shades of green, yellow, and red; blue and white and gold. It's beautiful, in a way equal but opposite to the silent winter nights in Wolf Trap, undisturbed snow and thousands of stars. Here, the stars are not in the sky; they're surrounded by them.

"It's beautiful," Will says softly. Looks to Hannibal at his side, cast in those same lights, fiercely handsome. He thinks that maybe he could get used to visiting cities, if not living in them, so long as Hannibal were with him.

Hannibal looks at Will and smiles, a faint and fond upward tilt of his mouth. His hand touches the small of Will's back. Even through the layers he wears, Will can feel the back-and-forth sweep of his thumb with shivering sensation. There's goosebumps hidden beneath the sleeves of his coat, but they're not because of the cold. "I'm glad you like it." His eyes linger on Will's face—surely longer than necessary, and when Will looks back at him, he finds himself studied keenly, pinned in place by Hannibal's rapt attention. His gaze lingers on Will's hair, his eyes, his cheeks, his mouth.

Will smiles, pleased. His lashes lower as he breaks eye contact; glances at Hannibal's shoulder, and wonders how the mark of his teeth has healed. How it looks. How it feels. "What?"

"I'm admiring your beauty. You are perhaps one of the most lovely people I've beheld in my life."

He flushes. Will glances up and down again—even his confidence flickers at *that.* "Be serious."

"I'm quite serious." Hannibal's eyes don't waver or divert. He is singularly focused. Consumed, like he might just mean to consume Will in return. Will's not even sure he'd protest.

Then, a breath. And Hannibal breaks eye contact to look up at the building behind them—a structure of steel and glass stretching into the sky. "Shall we go up?"

Will follows his gaze. "Up?"

"The Bygone is on the twenty-ninth floor overlooking the harbor. It's owned by an acquaintance of mine. You may recall our discussion of the noted chemist from whom I source my produce." Will nods, and when Hannibal nudges him, they turn and enter through the automatic doors. "Well, her husband is an award-winning chef. I was fortunate enough to meet them through the opera some years back, and we bonded over our love of the culinary arts. And despite my high standards for food, my expectations were met and exceeded. Baltimore is hardly a haven for fine dining, but I expect this establishment will earn a Michelin Star in short accord."

The hotel lobby is sleek, matched by the interior of the lift that shepherds them to the rooftop restaurant. And as they emerge into the establishment, Will is struck silent with wonder a second time.

Glass lamps are suspended from the ceiling in clusters like giant bubbles; the domes cast glowing warm light over a dark wood interior, highlighted with two broad cushioned benches back-to-back in the center of the room that create an intimate seating area, upholstered in faded yellow. The tables, tasteful, and the chairs modern and dark; the place settings, elegant, featuring plates and goblets

edged with gold. The outer walls are glass, overlooking the harbor from above; in the back of the establishment on a raised, central platform is a gleaming bar, and behind it, an entire wall stocked with bottles of vintage liquors—a veritable library of spirits. To one side is a balcony that appears to be closed for the season, that Will imagines might be open during the warmer months with outdoor seating.

It's a decidedly elegant aesthetic. Simply based on the ambiance and color scheme, Will can see how a place like this would fit into Hannibal's view of good taste; that's to say nothing of the scents in the air and the muted conversations about, that overall create a comfortable but high-class atmosphere.

The hostess spots them from across the room and approaches at once; Hannibal gives his name, and they are led to a small table tucked in the corner of the room where it's quieter. The view is stunning, and somewhat sobering in the sheer scope of their height over the water—clear lines of sight on either side. Certainly one of the best seats in the house. She plucks a placard from the table that reads *Reserved* in elegant cursive. The table itself is already set, menus laid primly across the pristine place settings.

"I'll be back momentarily with water and the wine list. Please make yourselves comfortable with compliments from the chef, Doctor Lecter."

Hannibal inclines his head and smiles, all charm as he bids her thanks; the poor hostess looks somewhat starstruck, and Will can hardly blame her. He's grinning to himself until the very moment Hannibal pulls out his seat, as his hands rest upon Will's shoulders—as his breath, too, falls still for just a moment, and he obligingly sheds Hannibal's coat into his waiting hands.

And when he turns, it's Hannibal who's silent; his eyes, rapt and dark. Ravenous.

Will's grin fades to something smaller. Smug. He turns and meets Hannibal's gaze; holds it as he slowly sits, and his chair is pushed in behind him, and his coat tucked over the seat back.

But, oh—turnabout is fair play, and it's Will's attention that is sharp and intent as Hannibal removes his coat and gloves to reveal a fine suit of rich, dark wool: charcoal gray with shockingly red, large-print windowpane check, set to contrast a starched white shirt and paisley tie.

Will's brows draw together, mystified and engrossed. "There's not a man alive who could wear the things you wear and even *begin* to make them work the way you do."

Hannibal blinks—and then levels Will with a devilishly handsome smile as he, too, sits. "My, what a compliment."

Will leans forward. Jesus; really, *only* Hannibal. "Compliments are flattery. This is just fact."

Hannibal's smile widens. "Well, by that logic, then we're the best-dressed couple here tonight."

Will's lips tic upward. He sits back in his seat and flashes his teeth. "Maybe it's true."

"I would have to agree. But not on my account." His attention is heavy, weighted. Slow-smoldering embers waiting to catch flame. "I'll admit it was unexpected, but I'm glad you called me tonight, Will."

Will opens his mouth to respond, but at that moment, the hostess returns with the wine list; she fills their water glasses, and at a glance Hannibal seems to know exactly what it is he's seeing. He orders wine for them both, something French. The hostess takes one glance at Will and resolutely makes the

conscious decision that he is old enough to be here, and to drink. Her negligence is his gain, he supposes.

At any rate, it gives him a moment to assess the strange pang that has made a home in his breast; some seed of anxiety and concern at the implication that seeking out Hannibal's company is in and of itself unexpected. "Was it really such a surprise?"

Hannibal tilts his head to the side with an assessing glance. He seems to read the truth of Will's question between the lines of what he's said and what he feels, even without a flicker of outward discontent. It's undoubtedly how he's gotten so far in life, and certainly rooted in why he's so keen to pursue psychology—Hannibal, himself, possesses a keen ability to read a person and understand their feelings at a glance. It's a brand of empathy all his own, and it makes him both incomparable and irreplaceable as a friend and lover.

It's also part of what makes him so dangerous.

"Not that you wanted to see me," he clarifies, "but that you would take the initiative to ask me out when you've seemed reluctant to search out external social interaction in the past. Though I'm happy to see that your confidence in yourself has grown…" He takes a sip of water. Rolls it on his tongue before he swallows, eyes on Will all the while. It sets down on the table again with an audible *clink.* "...forgive me, mylimasis, but I can't help but be concerned at the sudden change."

Will's expression is solid, but his heart spasms in his chest. "What do you mean?"

Hannibal blinks slowly. His eyes are not narrowed, not quite, but there's a faint pull between his brows that does speak of something that, if he were a lesser man, Will might think was uncertainty. "I hope you don't feel obligated to push yourself outside your comfort zone on my behalf. Don't misunderstand me—I treasure our time together, but I don't want you to think that you have to change yourself to please me. I've always found myself more than satisfied with uncovering your nature one day at a time."

Will won't do him the disservice of immediately denying it, because in a way, he's not wrong. But he's not entirely right, either.

Will *has* fundamentally changed as a person—but that change began long before Hannibal's presence in his life was as overt as it is. It began with the Ripper. Evolved, as Will learned to appreciate his unique and macabre brand of art. To see his own inner darkness for what it was, and to allow itself to grow fangs. It started him on this journey that would eventually lead him to where he is now.

And as he met Hannibal, and learned love. Learned self-love. Learned confidence and self-assuredness and how to embrace those parts of himself he once rejected. He learned compromise because of Hannibal. He learned moderation, as well as indulgence. He learned to be doted on, and to recognize the fine line between affectionate generosity and blatant manipulation. What it is to adore and be adored.

And in knowing him, and in knowing that devotion, he recognized it in other forms—like what he feels for Margot, and what it means to be so deeply devoted to someone that you would raze the Earth to the ground on their behalf, and in their name. To love someone so wholly and completely that you would risk everything to defend them.

He's changed, yes, but—

“I didn’t change for you,” Will murmurs. He reaches for his glass. Spins it slowly, and then lifts it. Takes a sip, and sets it back down before he finally meets Hannibal’s intent gaze. “I’ve changed *because* of you—but not *for* you. I’m my own person. We just happen to align. And as we’ve come into each other’s orbit, we’ve changed trajectory. But it’s mutual.”

Will blinks slowly. Reaches up, and tucks his hair behind one ear. To outsiders, it’s a casual gesture. But here, in the private stretch of space between them, he shows a flash of pearl and diamond earrings, and the brand of a deep red bite on his throat. It’s all for Hannibal’s eyes only.

“Our gravity is identical. We’re converging at the same rate. Coalescing. And I know at some point we’ll have to reach equilibrium or crash.” Will licks his lips and tastes the faint chemical tint of matte-stay lipstick. “But I don’t think it’s intentional. It’s just something that’s happening, and we’ll have to figure it out as we go.”

“So your counterpoint is that I’ve changed as much as you have,” Hannibal replies. His tone is mild, but there is something in his expression that’s deeply thoughtful.

“Do you disagree?” Will asks. “If I made a conscious decision to change *my*self, then you made a conscious decision to change *your*self. That doesn’t sound like either of us. I think the more likely thing is that, in a universe of infinite possibilities, we managed to find one perfect fit. And neither of us will ever be the same, but that doesn’t make it a bad thing. Maybe we needed changing. Despite all odds, maybe that’s why we met.”

“It’s a romantic notion.” Hannibal folds his hands on the tabletop. “That perhaps God himself intervened.”

“Makes you wonder about the alternative,” he agrees. Murmurs it, a wry acknowledgement of their own shortcomings. Of the emptiness Will would have faced without him. The loneliness. “And what life might’ve been like for both of us if we hadn’t found one another.”

A beat. Hannibal’s eyes fall from Will’s and settle on his water glass. He touches the edge of it, but hesitates in picking it up. And then— “I’d rather not. Wonder about it, that is.”

It’s a hell of an admission. One that steals Will’s breath momentarily, despite the knowledge that he *wanted* this. He *wanted* Hannibal dependent, wanted him hooked, and yet he never quite imagined he’d get it. Never quite imagined that he could fill the empty space in the Ripper’s life in such a way that Hannibal would keenly anticipate the loss of him, and be repelled simply by the thought.

But nor did Will ever think he’d need or want anyone the way he’s found himself bound to Hannibal. It’s not something he would change. Not something he would take back. Not now, even if he could. And Will knows his countenance softens; the lines around his eyes, the set of his mouth. “Yeah, I know what you mean.”

Hannibal reaches for him, then; finds Will’s hand, and tangles their fingers. Brushes his thumb over each ridge and valley of his knuckles. Hannibal is, by nature of his appreciation for fine art and culture, a deeply romantic creature. Will knows that he in no way harbors any illusions about what he does and the morality therein, but simply believes the benefits outweigh the drawbacks. That creating a higher message with a human life that he deemed substandard is akin to elevating them to a place of something near-holy. That’s what he’s done time and time again for Will, all in the name of reaching out. Connecting with him.

The Ripper is an old god who walks the earth. One who loves and delights and angers and retaliates with all that he is, and is not bound to the morals of mortal men. And a creature like that has fallen in

love with him. Loves him, deeply and desperately.

Will loves him desperately in return. And there's no doubt in his mind or heart that, one way or another, they are bound until death do they part.

There's a question on the tip of his tongue—one that is terrifying in its implications and ferocity, and that is far from his right to ask when there's still so many lies between them. Will bites hard on the inside of his cheek so it doesn't spill from his mouth unchecked. It's to his good fortune that the hostess returns at that moment with a bottle of wine and a pair of glasses, which she places and generously pours.

"Are you ready to order, or do you need another minute?" She asks sweetly.

Adequately distracted, Hannibal turns a querying glance to Will. Moment broken and opportunity presented, Will pitches his voice soft and turns the full force of his attention to her and smiles. "Everything looks delicious. I can't decide—what do you recommend?"

She brightens and launches into a summary of each course; it's clear she's experienced, well-educated about the sources of their ingredients, from foreign and domestic seafood to a carefully-curated selection of meats and vegetables. Hannibal listens attentively, interested, and at some points even seems appropriately impressed. Pleased. Will watches his face, even as he keeps his ears trained to her.

But in the end as she winds down, Will huffs, as an embarrassed, well-bred young woman out of her depth might, and looks and Hannibal beneath his lashes. Extends his leg beneath the table and nudges Hannibal's calf with his toe. "Choose for me."

It's not a question, but a flirtatious challenge and command. Hannibal knows what he likes, but he equally enjoys the opportunity to push Will to new heights. New experiences. The pleased, heavy-lidded gaze he sends to Will across the table says he's thinking the same. "Are you quite sure?"

"Positive." Will tips hs head in the other direction and gives a charming smile. Beams up at the hostess. Says conspiratorially, "He's an expert. I'm just along for the ride."

"You're not *just* anything. Very well," Hannibal replies mildly, and turns his attention back to the menu. His eyes skim over the page; weighted and embossed cardstock in a glossy black folio cover. "To start, may we please have the scallops bourguignonne and crab cake barigoule, followed by the autumn squash and endive salad with the walnut vinaigrette. For the entrees: Will, the Chilean sea bass *en papillote.* Myself, the Dover sole almandine. Ah—and with dinner, please, for my companion, a glass of the La Rocca 2015 soave classico. And for me, the La Clarté de Haut-Brion white bordeaux, 2010."

He closes the menu smartly and holds it out for the hostess to take. She smiles and inclines her head, no notes needed. Smart girl. "Absolutely. I'll bring your order to the kitchen and be back shortly with the appetizers."

"Thank you very much."

"You're so very welcome." She turns her back to the table, and as she retreats, her eyes catch Will's. Her nose wrinkles as her face breaks out in a grin; lines around her eyes as she soundlessly and quite obviously mouths and incredulous *oh my god* with an approving, subtle thumbs up.

Will can't help but bite back his laughter, hide his mouth behind his hand as he smiles in return. Hannibal's brows draw together, politely perplexed, and watches the woman as she retreats. Then looks to Will. "Something wrong?"

"No, not at all," Will says, deeply amused and terribly fond. He glances toward the kitchen and back again. "You have an admirer."

Hannibal blinks, and follows his eyes. "Oh. Well, not to worry."

"Not worried." Will smiles and leans back in his seat, though tilts his ankle and allows the toe of his shoe to drift along Hannibal's calf. "You have great taste in many things. It's nice to see it appreciated by those who know what you're talking about."

"I hope to share enough with you to a point where you, too, will know what I'm talking about." Hannibal smiles mildly, but there is a quiet hunger there in his eyes as he lifts his wine glass and slowly sips. "Of course, that'll take time."

Will hums idly in consideration. Leans forward again and lifts his own glass, and allows the wine to burst across his tongue, dry and crisp. "Quite some time, I imagine."

"Quite, yes." That same smile grows just a little wider. Touches the corners of his eyes. "Many places to go, things to experience. Starting with Europe, of course, but also parts of Asia, South America. I can't imagine many, if *any* places I could go that I wouldn't enjoy if I were with you."

Will has never so much as left the country. The thought of touring the *world* at Hannibal's side, therefore, causes his heart to race. Excitement and fear. An undercurrent of anxiety, knowing what he knows. That all Hannibal's proposed opportunities so clearly hinge on Will's successful maneuvering of a multifaceted situation, of which the subject himself is not even aware.

But if they were to leave now, without so much as a warning or goodbye, Will knows what it would look like to Jack Crawford. How it would draw his attention to Will, and to Hannibal by extension. And God only knows what he would find if the full force of his focus is turned solely to the correct place to look.

No. Better for Will to handle it. Plausible deniability and all that. And no chance to incur any doubt of his loyalty.

"Maybe once I graduate," Will murmurs, and sets his glass down. Softens the sharp set of his smile into something more genuine, and sees Hannibal's blossom and grow because of it. "We could go away for a few weeks. See all your favorite places, just the two of us."

His eyes crease around the corners as he takes a final sip and, too, places his glass on the table. "I would love to show you Florence. *La Galleria dell'Accademia,* the Uffizi. The Basilica of Santa Croce, the Cathedral of Santa Maria. Though, if there is a place of note, it would be the *Cappella Palatina*—the Norman Chapel in Palermo." Hannibal's eyes are distant in fond memory, the very shape of him as classic and austere as the architecture he remembers with such love. "It is, perhaps, my favorite place in the world. Severe, beautiful, timeless." He blinks and returns to focus; to Will. And he smiles, entirely focused on the moment, but radiating happiness at even the suggestion, the very thought. "Not unlike yourself. It would delight me to bring you there, if you are amenable in the future."

It's a rare treat to see Hannibal lit from inside with such pleasure. It warms Will from from his chest to his ribs, encasing his heart. He smiles and rolls his hand over on the tabletop, palm-up. Hannibal

doesn't hesitate in covering it with his own. "I'd really like that."

"Then we will." Hannibal exhales quietly, a short breath as his eyes flicker to their hands. As he lifts them, conjoined, and meets them halfway to press his lips to the backs of Will's fingers. He glances up from there, through his lashes—stares at Will, and then at the exposed flesh of his throat, like he is memorizing this very moment: sketching it in charcoal upon an entire wall within his mind.

It steals Will's breath. God, he wants this always. "What?" He whispers breathlessly.

"I have never given thought to the future before," Hannibal replies; squeezes his hand as he places it down once more. "I never cared to. I've never had to. I lived entirely in the moment, and if I wanted a change, I simply made it, or directly began my planning for it. I thought that looking constantly to the future was a weakness of men too afraid to act. But I see now that there is contentment to be found in a steady life with another, and that looking forward to the many years I hope to share with you is not a weakness at all." He stares at the bite mark. Inhales, and something shifts within his eyes. Exhales, and they return to Will's face. Simply, honestly, he says, "You make me very happy, Will."

Will's heart swells within his chest. Even Wilhelmina slows in her pacing, purring all the while. This, *tonight,* is a representation of everything they stand to gain if they should succeed. A reward enough to kill for, without doubt or hesitation. Without mercy or thought for anyone but their beloved, their Ripper, their Hannibal.

Will opens his mouth to reply, but the hostess reappears at that moment with the first plates—dishes fragrant, rich, and colorful; the scents of which make Will's mouth water with the scents of seafood, distant memories of a warmer place he once knew as home. Not home now, no: for home now is only with Hannibal, and the gulfs and docks and bayous of Louisiana are more fondly and idealistically captured in the form of a child's daydreams of a place long gone.

And Hannibal's eyes don't waver from Will the entire time.

"Anything else I can get you right now?" She asks.

Will doesn't even look up. "No, thank you, I think we're all set."

"Excellent. Alright, enjoy." Her receding footsteps disappear into the soft noise of the restaurant, but Will can still hear his own heartbeat in his ears.

And he smiles. Breaks his eyes away, and reaches for his wine glass—illicit for now, but not for much longer. Every day brings them closer to another experience, another week, another month, another year lived. Will knows with bone-deep certainty that he is more fortunate than he can ever imagine for finding Hannibal this early in life. Finding him here, now, when they have so much stretched out in front of them, so much to experience. Together.

He lifts it. Meets Hannibal's eyes. His foot hooks around the back of Hannibal's ankle, and when he feels an errant, exploratory toe brush his calf in return, he beams. "To the future, then."

Hannibal huffs a soft, amused laugh through his nose; smiles fondly as he lifts his glass, and reaches out to tap it against Will's with a delicate, muted *clink.* "May it start today, and every day."

Will sips. Places the glass down, and grins to himself. Feels Hannibal's attention heavy on him as he skims the edge of his thumbnail along the porcelain plate, and rolls his shoulders, then his head back. Catches his lower lip idly between his teeth and tugs it, just to feel that gaze sharpen like steel. Murmurs, "And every night."

God, he can already feel those hands on him like a physical touch as Hannibal's eyes drag over his body, and he replies so softly, "Is that so?" He looks suddenly, dangerously hungry—just not for food.

And Will smiles. Lifts his arms above his head in an idle stretch, and as his hands fall, they touch the back of his own neck. Drag down over his shoulders. Catch on that exposed and flimsy lace strap, which immediately captures Hannibal's rapt attention. *Gotcha.*

"Mm." Will turns his head to hear it *pop* ; if he so happens to flash the deep red bite that clings to the side of his throat, well, that's simply a happy accident. "Smells amazing. Clearly we *both* have great taste in our respective areas of expertise."

Hannibal's eyes narrow. He knows bait when he sees it. Of course, Will knows damn well *he* knows. But by the time he's done, it won't matter if Hannibal can see the hook—he'll be so desperate for another bite that he'll land himself, anyway. Will just has to be patient.

Hannibal exhales shortly, and deliberately diverts his attention to the food. Picks up his fork. "Eat your supper, you terrible thing."

Will huffs an amused breath, and bites back a sly smile. "You know, Margot said you were my sugar daddy, but I didn't take it so literally."

Hannibal nearly drops it—not quite, but *almost,* and Will laughs.

They emerge to a dark night, city streets that are notably less busy now than they would be during the day. Their hands lace together between them, bare skin and bare skin—Hannibal probably thinks Will wouldn't notice he never put his gloves back on, but he has, and he treasures the sensation of Hannibal's palm against his own.

They head for the parking garage, away from the lights, warm with excellent food and drink. They are, the two of them, a pair of nighttime creatures, completely and totally unmatched. So it stands to reason that Hannibal would be reluctant to separate from him. "Will you be staying the night?"

"I wish I could," Will replies honestly, "But I left Winston at home, and I haven't arranged anything with my neighbor. Might've been a little *too* impulsive."

Hannibal hums his acknowledgement, which is meant to be mild and toneless—but the way his fingers tighten around Will's give away his disappointment. "Regardless, it's been wonderful to see you."

"Well, I'm not leaving *quite* yet." He's amused, and shoots Hannibal a sidelong glance. "You still have to give me a ride back to my car. Unless you mean to make me walk."

An equally amused hum. "You know I would never."

"In theory. Though that might just mean I haven't managed to irritate you enough to leave me behind yet. Something to strive for, I guess." Will smiles to himself, in good humor. Darts his tongue out to wet his lips, and feels that smile widen. "I like getting you wound up."

“Yes, I’ve learned that about you,” Hannibal murmurs in reply. Returns Will’s look with one of wry fondness. “You have an alarmingly high rate of success.”

That gets a grin from Will, and as they approach the Bentley, he says, “Maybe you’re just not as unshakable as you think you are.”

Hannibal huffs as he guides Will to the passenger’s side; ever the gentleman, he opens the door and waits for Will to sit. “I beg to differ. You’re the exception, not the rule.”

The door closes behind him. Will settles comfortably as Hannibal rounds the car to the other side and gets in, then starts the ignition. He knows it’s certainly true; there’s no one who can get to Hannibal like he can. No one who knows him, understands him, *tempts* him. And Will knows for certain that even if there were, he wouldn’t stand for competition.

He rolls his head toward Hannibal with heavy-lidded eyes and a certain tilt to his head. “Well, thank God for that.”

Hannibal glances at him; his throat moves as he swallows, then puts the car in reverse. He’s striking in profile, as he processes whatever words he’s thinking of in response to *that* particular sentence; still, a master of feigning casual with the loose way he holds the wheel, the casual slope of his shoulders. Every move he makes is performance art, an actor worthy of awards if only anyone knew he were doing it. Anyone except Will.

And it’s nice to see through the veil. To know what it is he’s seeing. But Will can’t help but remember the creature that tears through the barricade at his touch. A deeper part of the man he loves, who believes he’s still invisible.

Oh, but he’s not. Will sees him just fine, in the flash of streetlights illuminating his eyes blood red, in the poise he wears like a mantle of kings—

—and as that poise breaks, when Will reaches for his right hand and takes it from the wheel, and places it on the rough lace band that encircles his nylon-clad thigh.

Hannibal doesn’t avert his eyes from the road; not at first. For a moment, he is still, silently stunned, and his fingers slowly tighten to the point of leaving imprints in Will’s flesh, warm and soft and giving way beneath his force. He licks his lips, a slow sweep, and he presses them together. Inhales. Exhales. Swallows again, and Will intently watches the movement of his throat.

He hums softly, warm amusement, and leans back in his seat. Arches his hips, just a little, and covers the back of Hannibal’s hand with his own. Curls his fingertips into the dips between his digits like a knife slipping between ribs, and drags his hand higher. Inward. Until he’s well beneath Will’s dress, and his knuckles brush the garter strap.

For the second time that night, Hannibal’s lips part. This time, it exposes the sharp points of his teeth, nearly a snarl. His voice dangerously soft when he says, “I thought you weren’t planning on coming home with me?”

And Will bares his teeth in a grin, rolls his head back and exposes his neck and casts Hannibal a glance from beneath his lashes as he murmurs, “Who says I plan on us making it home?”

The car slows, and Hannibal is bathed in the red glow of a traffic light. Will’s unbothered by the traffic around them—he knows Hannibal’s hand is too low to be seen, it’s too dark, and no one has any idea what’s happening here but them. It’s twice as good that way, twice as raw, knowing he’s the

only one in the whole damn world who can feel how Hannibal's hand shakes, how it starts to hurt as his fingers dig in. How his fingers, too, flex on the steering wheel, no longer quite so casual or in control. The twitch of his carotid in his throat, fluttering with the uptick in his pulse.

Hannibal is a powerful man. By all accounts, he's unmatched. But Will is neither entirely male nor female, and there's never been anyone quite like him before.

"I'm curious, then," Hannibal replies, "what exactly do you have in mind?"

A powerful thing, pride. One that compels Hannibal to keep his composure as long as he can manage, even when Will is determined to break him of it. "Why don't you just drive and leave that up to me?"

"I should give myself over entirely to your whims, then?" he replies. It's maybe sharper than he means to say it, for the moment it escapes, there's a flicker of a dismayed frown across his face, conflicted but tense.

Oh, but Will purrs. The first threads unraveling. "Yes. That's exactly what I want."

Hannibal exhales, near-silent. He says nothing.

Will lowers his lashes. Stares at him, unwavering, until Hannibal changes a sidelong glance to him in return. Their eyes meet.

"And there's a scar on your shoulder that says that's what you want, too." Will narrows his eyes with intent, and he softly growls, "Don't think your teeth are in my neck for any other reason than I wanted them there, Hannibal."

The energy within the confined space goes tense in a second, crackling with danger as Will's words catch up to him. Hannibal's shoulders tense, and his eyes flash with passing headlights as the intersection traffic slows with the yellow. Will is in a closed space with a killer, but it doesn't cow him. It invigorates him.

"And I want you again," Will says. "So are you going to give me what I want or not?"

Hannibal turns his attention back to the road, but the smooth movement of his neck, of his shoulders, of his jaw tensing and releasing is all animal.

Will waits.

The light turns green.

Hannibal's fingers spread wide and hot and push further, to the crux of his thigh, the vee of his legs, and the back of his hand brushes Will's clothed cock, and he hits the accelerator.

The section of the Johns Hopkins parking structure where the employees store their vehicles is deep within its guts, on the lower level closest to the lifts, and where the lights are frightfully dim or nonexistent. It's something Will is silently thankful for as Hannibal pulls into his assigned parking space, as he skims his fingernails over Hannibal's wrist and forearm and watches him patiently.

He kills the ignition, plunging them into darkness. But other than that, he's still.

Will is content to outlast his silence. The arousal buzzing in his belly is low and slow, and for the moment, entirely tolerable. He maintains the patient path of his nails, and makes note of the goosebumps on Hannibal's forearms that he can't see in the dark, but he *feels.*

And then—"I'm afraid if you want something, darling, you're going to have to take it."

And, oh, he phrases it like a challenge, but it's a thinly-veiled plea for permission. Will's initiation as consent, and it's consent he's glad to give.

He pushes Hannibal's palm flat against his cock and arches into it; reaches across his own body to unbuckle his seat belt, turns and lifts himself onto his knees as he reaches for Hannibal's. It *whirrs* as it retracts, and the center console *squeaks* as Will crawls over it and into Hannibal's lap and purrs, "That can be arranged."

His knees hit either side of the leather driver's seat, and Will reaches down for the seat adjustment lever—pushes it down and back and disengages it until it falls and slides back, until Hannibal is reclined and staring up at him as Will's fingers work quickly at the belt and buttons of his own coat. He sheds it; dumps it carelessly into the passenger seat and gets to work on Hannibal's as two hands cup the backs of his thighs, the lace and nylon, and slip up, dragging his dress with them.

He falters as he brushes Will's bare ass, then the split waistband of his thong, disappearing into the lace garter belt. His fingertips curl beneath it, around it, and he holds it like a handle with which he could maneuver Will's body if he wanted to. He exhales hard at the very moment Will undoes the last button of his coat and shoves it back over Hannibal's shoulders, pinning his arms to his sides and forcing him to release if he wants to be freed.

He growls and surges up to kiss Will, licks hard into his mouth and sucks the taste of sweet wine from his tongue. Breaks it, and his hold, and moves like coiled rage incarnate as he struggles out of his coat, as Will unbuttons his suit jacket with haste, and pins him inside that, too. Hannibal *snarls* as Will breathlessly laughs, grabs him by the face and rolls his hips down against Hannibal's confined cock. All of him trapped for Will's amusement and pleasure. He should really be more careful what he asks for.

He moans and laughs and Hannibal catches Will's lower lip between his teeth, tugs just hard enough for it to sting as he works his arms free. Pulls both sets of sleeves inside out until his expensive cufflinks *pop* and release, clatter into the dark. To Will's delight and deep frisson of arousal, he *leaves* them that way, never quite so unhinged from his perfect persona as he is in this moment.

He pushes his hands under Will's dress. Hisses as he feels the lace and satin against his fingers, as his nails bite into Will's skin. "What color?" he breathes against Will's mouth.

"Black," Will whispers back, and as Hannibal cups his cock and *rubs* through the satin , his legs start to shake with the lightning in his spine. *"Fuck.* All black."

He knots his free hand in the skirt and pulls up, though not enough to remove it without help, or without letting Will go, which he seems determinedly unwilling to do. "Let me see you."

God. Will nods and temporarily abandons his mission of unbuckling Hannibal's belt. "Get the zipper —my left, your right."

It forces Hannibal to use both hands, which he snaps his teeth about with frustration and eagerness both, but stares at the exposed band of Will's bralette as it's revealed. Leans back against the seat and sits and stares as Will crosses his arms and pulls the dress over his head, his hair be damned. He's burning up from the inside with want, and it's not quite zero-to-sixty if he's been cruising at forty all night, is it?

He drops the dress into the passenger footwell. He can see the glow of his own skin in the dark, creamy-pale and unmarred by hands or teeth for far too long. All that remains is the blazon of pride on his neck, and Will pulls his hair around the opposite side of his throat to expose it. To show it off. And despite the display before him, once it's uncovered, it seems Hannibal can look at little else.

One hand pushes into the curls at the base of Will's neck, fists in them, holds them out of the way. He drags Will down, more rough than he ever would have dared to be a few weeks ago, and licks over the imprints.

Will's hands curl in the loose fabric at his shoulders, wrinkling his perfect white shirt, and it's with a quiet snarl of his own that he pulls at it, pulls it free of where it's tucked into Hannibal's pants, and then draws his palms down his muscled chest. He lingers at the thick flex of Hannibal's abdomen beneath the cotton, whimpers at it; can't help it as he moans and pushes his hands beneath the shirttails and rucks it up, starving to feel muscle and skin. Wants to feel it against his own, and never quite so desperately as when he feels Hannibal bite him again.

"Oh, *fuck,"* Will cries, spine curling in as he digs his nails into Hannibal's sides, as he pushes his throat further into those imperfect teeth. He grinds down into Hannibal's lap, lips parted and panting as Hannibal's arm goes around his waist, as he grips the garter belt and *pulls* Will down against his cock. Fucks up against him, a rolling grind like he's already inside.

And, God, that's *it.*

Will snaps and snarls his own determination—pushes against Hannibal's chest *hard,* until he's forced to release the bruising grip on Will's throat or simply rip it out. He opts to release, though his eyes blaze in the dark as Will pulls the tail of his belt from the buckle, but leaves it; undoes his fly, but reaches *through* the slit in his boxers to pull his erection free. His cock is hot, thick, wet at the head, and Will's mouth waters desperately at the thought of tasting it again—

—but not tonight.

Instead, he slips his fingers under the band of his bra and finds the tiny foil packet, skin-warmed. Pulls it out, and Hannibal's eyes are rapt on it as Will brings it to his teeth. It's not the right size or shape for a condom, that's for certain—and it's not.

Will tears the corner, not all the way off. Frees one hand, and squeezes the contents into his palm. Slick. Slippery. Gleaming in the dimness as Will snakes his hand between them and wraps his fingers around Hannibal's cock to wet it properly.

He exhales sharply in surprise, breath catching in his throat as he glances down, watches with heavy-lidded eyes: not just for the feeling, but for the sight of it, the sound. All senses, desperately absorbing every move Will makes, every feeling he sees fit to give.

Will takes a breath. Reaches back with the other to tug the strap of his thong aside. Rubs what's left of the lube over his hole, and bites his lip at the feeling of it, then smears the remainder of it across his own belly. He grabs Hannibal by the hips and *pulls*, tucks his knees in tight around him in the space

he's created. Braces one hand against the back of the driver's seat. Finds Hannibal's cock with the other.

Hannibal's pupils blow black. "Will—"

Will's mouth drops open. His eyes fall closed. His head tips forward, forehead pressed to the crook of Hannibal's neck and shoulder, and he moans. *Loudly.*

God, it's a lot. Right on the edge of too much, and his legs shake and his hand shakes as he pushes himself down, deliberately relaxes his muscles even though holy *fuck* is that harder than he's read about, but the deeper he gets the easier it gets even though the broken, wounded sounds that keep breaking from his lungs sound more like pain instead of pleasure. But they're not, *fuck,* they're not, especially as Hannibal snarls and curses and his hands curl around Will's hips hard enough to bruise.

It hurts, but it's so fucking good.

Will can't stay still. He lifts his head, and presses his forehead to Hannibal's temple, and the hand on the seat goes to a broad, hot shoulder and *squeezes,* and—

And when his eyes open and meet Hannibal's in the dark, for a moment he's stricken silent.

Worship.

There's no other word for it. Hannibal's mouth is open, his teeth bared, but the lines around his eyes are ones of raw, stunned pleasure. Soft, stuttered moans and gasping breaths, unlike any sounds Will has ever heard him make, and as Will seats himself fully, Hannibal's head tips back. His eyes close, and his throat and chest are slick with sweat, gleaming and vulnerable, and—

Will leans forward, noses beneath the curve of his jaw, and tries and fails to take a full breath. This angle feels so different from the couch in Hannibal's study. And as Will stares at him and sees Hannibal's features both strained and helpless, he realizes this moment is unspeakably different in every way.

Will threads his fingers into Hannibal's hair, slips them down his neck, then does it again. "Hey," he whispers, and swallows hard, and—"Hannibal, are you alright?"

A pause. He nods, and whispers, "Yes."

"Can I move?"

A hard, shuddering exhale. Hannibal's hold on Will falters. His hands flatten, palms broad and hot, and slide up Will's spine, just *feeling.* Back down again, and his thumbs swipe over the crests of Will's hips. Slip beneath the straps of his waistband, and settle back into the pink pressure marks he's left with his grip. All sensuality. Affection in the place of desire.

His eyes open, and instantly search for Will. Find him. And Hannibal reaches out, cups Will's cheeks in his palms, and draws him down. Touches their mouths together, a chaste press of lips that becomes just… breathing.

Jesus. Will's ravenously takes in every second of whatever Hannibal is going through. He's never seen him like this before, always commanding and present in every moment. Now, he's made soft. He didn't even know Hannibal could truly *do* soft. Will noses at his cheek, draws him close, rests against him with forearms braced on Hannibal's shoulders. Ducks his head and waits for Hannibal to meet his gaze; for lack of a better thing to ask, "Did I break you?"

That, at least, makes him laugh—though the pull between his brows is nearly pained. “You’ve made a very good attempt at it. Maybe.”

Will smooths Hannibal’s hair away from his face, head tilted as Hannibal nudges his cheek into Will’s palm like a lost and wayward thing. And Hannibal looks at his hand, touches his lips to Will’s fragile wrist, and when he turns again to meet his eyes—

—he’s unshielded. Broken open. Entirely present, unhidden, vulnerable, and raw. He stares at Will like one might behold the Messiah, or something truly holy.

And in that moment, whatever yawning darkness lives inside Will’s mind and heart sees something fit for the taking. It bares its fangs, sharpens his claws, tightens his hand around the curve of Hannibal’s cheek to hold him hard and steady and—

“Good,” Will whispers.

—goes in for the kill.

Will flattens his palm against Hannibal’s chest. Pushes him back against the seat until his back is flat, and follows him down. Boxes him in and rocks his hips; finds Hannibal’s wrists and lifts them up, pushes them into place against the bars of the seat’s headrest. Until it hurts, and Hannibal relents and wraps his hands around them. Stays, because Will wants him to. Will nods once, sharply; Hannibal exhales hard and stares at him so deeply that whatever passes for his soul is certainly seeing Will’s right back.

Will flashes his teeth as he rises on his knees, lifts himself nearly off Hannibal’s cock and drops back down, taking him in to the base. It draws a sharp exhalation from Hannibal’s lungs, a tight flex in his muscles as he resists grabbing, and when he tries to lifts his hips to meet Will halfway, Will forces him down with a warning growl. Mouth open, hair dripping around their faces. Nothing in the world right now that isn’t them, their bodies, the thick, slick shove of Hannibal’s cock inside him and the unnecessary force Will exerts to hold him immobile and *take* everything Hannibal offers with his acquiescing stillness.

Will wants everything. *Everything.*

Whether it’s the roughness or the slick squelch of their bodies that’s pushed him to this point, there’s no light to Hannibal’s eyes anymore. They are simply open, both unseeing and all-seeing, absorbing the residual radiation of the black hole inside Will that demands nothing less than all he is.

Hannibal makes a sound that is too formless to be words, a forceful noise that Will draws from his lungs as he digs his nails in and drags down over his clothed chest and grinds down *hard.* God, Will wants to rip his shirt open, feel the hair and heat of his chest, his thundering heart. Tear it out with his teeth. Lay more marks that Hannibal will feel for longer this time, scar better. More claims he’ll wear beneath his clothes and press on until they hurt whenever Will’s not there. And if he’s never done it before, Will wants to ensure that he fucks Hannibal good enough that he’ll damn sure do it now.

Will clenches around him, claws at him, and languishes in his hiss; revels in the way Hannibal watches Will’s body move like he’s desperate to put his mouth on it, but stays still beneath his hands. He licks his lips, gets them wet at the sight of Will’s cock trapped inside his panties, pink and hot and dripping slick, untouched. His hands tighten; the fragile veins stand out on top of his shifting bones, and Will leans in close, ruts his cock against Hannibal’s belly. Arches his throat, just in reach of his teeth, but when he lifts his chin, Will draws his head back and denies him. He delights in the

frustration he sees, in his own cruelty, and when he bares his teeth in a vicious, triumphant expression, he sees something in Hannibal's eyes spark right back at him and recognize kin.

One hand plants on Hannibal's shoulder and digs his nails in around the bite he left. The other slips under his arms, behind his head, and fists in his hair. Clutching. Claiming. Will rolls his hips in a smooth and sinuous motion and watches every flash of ecstasy, every iota of wordless and desperately growing need to touch. Takes everything he wants, and gives nothing back, and God, it feels *good.*

When he moans, it's more like a growl. It builds from inside him, something he doesn't recognize. Not Will or Wilhelmina, but something that has no name at all—maybe it hails from the pit inside them they both crawled out of; were birthed from, and that he discovered again in the life cycle of insects. The one that has always seen death and known it as a friend and as a lover.

Hannibal's pupils are huge, broad and black. His mouth is open, panting, gasping; his eyes are tight and tense with pleasure so keen it's nearly pain, and Will kisses him, teeth to lips, tongue to teeth. He pulls Hannibal's head back, forces him to submit fully and he *does,* stares up at Will until his lashes flutter and finally squeeze closed, until he relaxes fully and completely into Will's grip. Until the tension leaves his muscles and the fight leaves his body, until each breath is a gasp and his legs fall open wide so Will can take everything he desires.

Whatever you want, he says with his compliance, each heated and wordless moan fed straight into Will's mouth, that thunders through his pounding pulse, his twitching, leaking cock. *All of it is yours.*

It's exactly what Will has been waiting for. He draws it out as the heat builds, slows each push and pull, indulges solely his own whims. As he pulls back, Hannibal's eyes snap open. There's something desperate there, but he doesn't protest—he stares with rapt desire at Will's mouth, starving. Ravenous. Robbed of the taste of him, wanting for his return. His fingers tighten around the bars, holding on for lack of something else to hold on to. His shoulders flex with the discomfort of their awkward contortion. His hips twitch and tremble as Will's body parts and he sinks inside. His abdomen tenses at each wet drag of him back out.

He is tied and trussed by Will's silent command, at his direction; all at his desire and his leisure to ensure he himself is well-fucked, and to leave Hannibal well-used.

Will sinks down slowly, lets Hannibal feel his body forced open inch by inch, and watches his face because he can. Hannibal's mouth is raw, bitten-red; cheeks and chest dull pink, barely even visible in the dark but for the depth of tone to his skin. He doesn't surge up in search of his own pleasure—he simply watches Will with frantic, gutted reverence that reaches *deep.*

Blatant supplication and adoration. Raw devotion.

Will stops. Hannibal stares at him, mouth open, chest heaving, and only breaks that eye contact as Will sighs and reaches up—finds one hand, and works at it with his fingers until Hannibal's brain catches up with his body, and allows Will to pull it free, then brings it to his mouth. Will kisses his strained knuckles, aching with residual tension, then brings Hannibal's hand to his hair. Waits until that, too, clicks, and he slips his hand into Will's wild curls and cups the nape of his neck gently, so gently.

The last time they did this, Will confessed that he liked feeling owned. And he knew, somewhere, intrinsically, that he has always wanted to own Hannibal in return. And he had slipped that collar on. Watched it grow sturdier, from The Hanged Man's noose, to leather, to chain. And now, beneath the soft cruelty of Will's hands, it's turned to steel—secured and locked. It's not just hypothetical, it's real as Will's palm that falls and closes around his throat. He can feel the proof of it in the tremble of

Hannibal's muscles and the steady pounding of his pulse. In the way Hannibal stares at him, secure in the knowledge that he could break Will's neck, but if Will were to kill him here and now, it would be the greatest honor to die at his whim.

Will gentles his grip on Hannibal's hair; tips his head back until it meets the seat and rests there. He smooths sweat-damp wayward strands back from his face, away from his eyes. And, with their eyes locked, leans down until their mouths meet.

Will licks at his bruised lips and Hannibal's mouth opens on a broken sigh; he laps at his monster's fangs, coaxes sweetness from his tongue. Then he cradles Hannibal's face in both hands and rewards his patience, his need.

Will's thighs flex. Hannibal inhales with something too gentle to be called a gasp, and as Will takes him slow and deep, he makes a sound too wounded to be called a moan.

He knows he can't praise Hannibal the way he wants to. Knows saying the words out loud will cross some invisible line, and that this ownership Will has of him must live solely in the silence between sentences. But he thinks the words with such volume that he knows Hannibal can read them on his face. *You needed this, didn't you? You needed to know this was in me all along. I'm here now, and you're mine.*

Will tips his head back, braces his hands on Hannibal's shoulders and grips hard at his rumpled shirt like a warhorse's reins. Falls back into every thrust up, fucks himself hard enough it nearly hurts, that each breath is forced from his lungs in an explosion of sound, and he feels each downward grind inside his guts. He rolls his head sideways so Hannibal's hand in his hair starts to sting and pull; meets his eyes and sees them flash with bottled, unfulfilled desire, contents under dangerous pressure.

Will lifts his chin and stares at him through his wild curls and the hellfire glow in his belly and growls, "Fuck me until we come."

It's all he needs, and the coiled spring in Hannibal's muscles snaps. He snarls and shoves his hand into the front of Will's underwear, starved for the feel of it; cups his hand around the heat of Will's cock and gives him something to rut against as he takes control of their rhythm. Slow, powerful rolls of his hips that brush past Will's prostate until his insides shiver and lurch, until Will's breath is hot against the bare skin of Hannibal's throat.

"I'm close," he whispers, and Hannibal snaps his teeth with furious want; wraps his fingers around Will's cock and gets him nice and slick with his dripping precome. *"God,* Hannibal, just like that. Fuck, that's good."

Hannibal breathes unevenly, unsteadily, and nudges his cheek against Will's neck like some desperate, aching thing, reacting to Will's approval outside the realm of human emotion. There's a sound trapped somewhere in his throat that hasn't quite made it out, and it might very well just be Will's name, a plea, a prayer flung skyward from a dedicated supplicant to a capricious young god who walks the earth.

And he has felt Hannibal's worship and found it good.

Will turns into his touch, into the stinging heat of his mouth, and *takes.* Kisses him, soft and wet and so goddamn good it's almost cruel as he sinks his teeth into Hannibal's lower lip and clenches around him, and, well, that's all either of them can take.

Hannibal's jaws part, his mouth falls open, a broken sound torn from his lungs as Will's body clutches tight around him and he drips and pulses and spills into Hannibal's palm. Blood blooms into Will's mouth, ritual sacrifice, and he sucks it down and drinks his fill until he tastes only consecrated sacrament on the back of his tongue.

The peace, when it comes, is bone-deep. And when he wraps his arms around Hannibal's neck with furious love and draws his face down to Will's shoulder, they melt together into one exhausted, overwrought creature. Two halves of one monstrous whole.

The silence is long. Their lungs heave. Hannibal's muscles twitch in the throes of post-orgasm, still subject to the clutch of Will's body which must now be agonizing, but he doesn't complain. He wraps himself around Will, face to throat, arms to waist—nuzzles, noses, searches out Will's warmth and makes it his home. Smooths his hands down his sides, his hips, his back. Touches him anywhere he can reach, *everywhere.* Runs his fingers through Will's hair, loose around his mid-back. Presses a reverent, wordless kiss to the scar he left high on Will's neck like he's suddenly and fully aware of exactly what manner of creature he dared to sink his teeth into. Will holds him all the while, a constant and unmoving weight—holds him, and wonders how long it's really been since Hannibal has been held by someone who matters, instead of doing the holding for someone who doesn't.

Will rests his cheek on the crown of Hannibal's head and skims his knuckles back and forth over the nape of his neck. Feels the words bubble inside him until they spill from his mouth. "I love you," he says, because he has to say it; can't bear not to make sure Hannibal knows that right now. He's placed everything that he is at Will's feet and is starving for his affection, and this jealous, possessive love is the best proof Will has to give.

Hannibal nods. Doesn't speak. But Will knows the adoration, the acceptance, from the soft sweep of Hannibal's hands across his skin.

Will touches him until the coiled tension remaining in Hannibal's muscles unwinds and fades away, and until his skin begins to cool beneath Will's palms. Until Will himself is shivering, and Hannibal lifts his head, looks up, silently attentive. And finally, leans in for a wanting kiss that is slow and sweetly gentle, a press of lips that just as soon drifts apart.

Will inhales at long last and makes a murmur of uncomfortable discontent; he rubs his hands over Hannibal's shoulders in silent reassurance and finally lifts himself free of Hannibal's lap, winces and hisses as his locked muscles protest. Hannibal watches him with a pull between his brows like Will's departure is the least desirable thing he can possibly imagine, and yet he can't find a way to appropriately protest it. But Will sees it. Sits back on his haunches, even as he leans over to reach for his dress, crumpled in the footwell.

"I really do have to go home," he says gently. Pulls the dress back on over his head; lets it bunch around his waist as he ekes the zipper back down himself. "I'm sorry about your suit."

"Clothing can be mended," Hannibal replies. His voice rasps, a subtle drag after going so long without speaking, expressing so many things without words. His eyes are lowered, his shoulders deceptively lax as he rolls his neck and it cracks—more than once. "And if it can't, it's replaceable. I'm not concerned."

Will hums softly, and pays no attention to the dress rucked up around his hips. He reaches out, skims his fingers over the wrinkled front of Hannibal's shirt. Over the slick stains on his belly from Will's cock, and lower, to where Will left pink scrapes on his abdomen. To the fluids—sweat and lube and precome, smeared over his open fly. He huffs through his nose as Will leans in, noses at his cheek,

and tucks Hannibal's slick, soft cock back into his pants and boxers. Gently amused, he murmurs, "It seems I'm bad for your orderly life."

Hannibal turns into his touch, and reaches out in return to lay his hand upon Will's still-bare hip. Such a simple little thing, to lay his palm where Will can feel its warmth after everything they just did, but for some reason, these moments in the aftermath feel just as raw, as exposed. Perhaps even more so, when Hannibal meets his eyes in the dim light and replies against the corner of Will's mouth, "Life without disorder is no life at all."

And oh, Will knows. He feels that truth as keenly as Hannibal does, and covers his hand with his own. "Then it's a good thing for both of us that I'm not going anywhere."

The silence is tense for a moment in a way that silence with Hannibal rarely is. But then he looks down, to where their fingers brush.

"Are you not?" Hannibal asks.

Will exhales.

It's true that in the months past, there was a soul-deep fear looming over his head, the frame of a guillotine that was shaped like branching antlers and swarming shadows. But Will knows better, now —that the guillotine is not that at all, and the structure expanding high above his head is a scaffolding for something greater.

He's not afraid of the Ripper anymore. How can he be? He's not a threat, but a companion deeply known and deeply loved.

Which means the only thing Will has to fear is being taken *from* the Ripper. From Hannibal.

But that's not going to happen. It just won't.

Will threads their fingers together and lifts Hannibal's hand to his mouth. Cradles it in both of his own as he brushes his lips over each knuckle, each dip between his fingers. And then he turns it. As he did so many weeks ago, Will kisses the palm of Hannibal's hand, the plush base of his thumb, the tender innards of his wrist. And from there, with his mouth against Hannibal's life line he looks up from beneath his lashes and vows, "No, Hannibal. I'm not."

Hannibal inhales silently through his nose; breaks eye contact as he exhales. His shoulders relax with deliberate force. He opens his mouth and closes it again, and Will can see the thoughts behind his eyes. The many things Will has written in secret to the Ripper. The promises he's made that Hannibal should be naive of, but isn't. He can't say anything about it without drawing attention to his knowledge, revealing himself and his identity, and for that reason, Will allows him to stew unless he should confess all, right now. Unless he should tell the truth, in which case, Will would no longer lie —

"Given that we converged here tonight," Hannibal says without meeting his eyes, "would you still like me to visit you this weekend?"

Will folds Hannibal's hand within his own. Draws it to his chest, and holds it against his heart. "Yeah," Will replies. Like there's any doubt. And a part of him knows this barest glimpse *of* doubt is because of the vulnerability Hannibal's just shown him; it's new to him, alien. Likely unwelcome. And he is ensuring Will won't flee from it, and from him, even while he tries to hide those open

windows to his own soul that Will ripped from the hinges. “Of course I do. I always enjoy your company, Hannibal.”

Hannibal nods once, almost to himself, but there is a softening in the tense lines around his eyes, the hard corners of his mouth. And he looks up, inhales—and when he does, Will is patiently waiting to meet him halfway, if only Hannibal should ask him to come. So he searches Hannibal’s gaze when they meet in the middle, and finds a strange and gentle melancholy. The need for reflection. It’s the least Will should expect, so he accepts that with a small, acquiescing nod.

He wonders what it must feel like for Hannibal to fight to hide so much of himself when he so desperately wants to share it. It is, perhaps, the first time Will looks at what he’s doing and realizes that, in depriving Hannibal of what Will knows, he is not only perpetuating the death of innocents, but the loneliness of the man he loves.

Of the two, he knows which bothers him more.

“Then I look forward to seeing your home,” Hannibal murmurs. He inhales. Huffs an exhale, and glances down at his own state of undress. He reaches beyond Will, to the key of the Bentley, and turns it in the ignition. The engine purrs to life, and with it, the dashboard lights. Hannibal makes a quiet sounds of surprise and discontent. “It’s getting late. You have quite the drive ahead of you.”

“I know,” Will replies with a gentle sigh. *11:01*. He’ll be lucky to get home before twelve-thirty; has to be back in Maryland for eight. He silently curses the fact that he didn’t think to ask his neighbor about Winston—but part of him thinks that Hannibal might need some space to retreat and regroup. “I’ll get going.”

Hannibal reaches for Will’s coat; plucks it from the passenger seat and sweeps it around Will’s shoulders, then smooths the wrinkles away. Even in the state of absolute chaos Will has left him in, his first and primary concern is setting Will to rights. In a way, it’s typical. He wonders if it’s a trend that will hold true when Hannibal is aware of the discord Will sows.

Hannibal’s looks at him. Tilts his head, and takes in the sight of Will, tousled but not quite chaotic. He breathes in through his nose. Reaches out to tuck Will’s hair behind his ear, and drinks in the sight of his teeth in Will’s neck before his touch falls away. He blinks slowly, all raw satisfaction and contentment; when he exhales, it’s with a soft and reverent sigh. “I told you I would tell you when next I saw you. You truly are a force of destruction, mylimasis.”

Oh, if only he knew.

“I try,” Will murmurs with wry humor. He pops the driver’s side door, and with his belongings collected, slips his feet back into his heels. Places one foot on the pavement before he pauses, and looks back at Hannibal—suit ruined, mouth bitten-red, his composure still in shambles.

Maybe this is destruction, true. But God destroys and God creates, and maybe instead this is a moment of rebirth for the both of them. In what capacity is yet to be seen.

“And Hannibal,” Will says with the faintest curve of a smile, and leans back in for one last kiss. As he stands, as he leaves the Bentley and his beloved behind, he says just loud enough for Hannibal to hear—and close enough to see the moment his hopes coalesce—“It’s just my house. It’s not my home.”

3:7

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! First of all, thank you SO much for helping this fic reach more than 1k kudos and (very close to) 19k hits!! Holy shit, y'all!! We're at 40 chapters strong, which is kind of incredible to me, and yet, here we are. Thank you for all the support, to every new and old reader, and for everyone who's just joining, buckle in for the craziest part of the ride that's still yet to come.

This chapter ended up getting split because it was already 10k, and I decided I wanted to break it where it felt natural. This fic seriously just keeps getting away from me. Someone, please, make them stop.

He arrives to a dark house in a ruined suit. The jacket may be salvageable. The pants, probably less so. The cuffs of his shirt are torn, at least one button lost from the front fastenings. Even his underwear are still damp and clinging, an altogether disgusting sensation apart from the knowledge of its origins.

Secure in his environment, but never quite so insecure in his moorings, Hannibal strips to his socks and carries the remnants of his composure to the master bedroom in the dark. He puts the suit away with a mental note to bring it to the dry cleaner's in the morning, if the daylight should make it look like it can be saved at all.

His house is quiet as it is austere. The only sound is his own breathing, his footsteps on tile as he enters the master bathroom. Marble, glass, stone. It seems so very long ago now that Will sat on the raised edge of the tub while Hannibal bandaged his legs; a lifetime since the first time they kissed simply for the desire of kissing. An age since Hannibal cleaned Will's blood from the floor and found the color as bewitching as the sight of Will in tears. Now the idea is nothing short of unsettling. Short of Will's blood beneath his nails or in his teeth, it is a strange and haunting thing to realize Hannibal no longer can abide the thought of him hurt.

But the desire *to* hurt one another is a heady one—the proof stares at him in his own reflection, in welted claw marks across his belly, a faintly purple shadow around his hip, a puncture just off-center in his lower lip. And hurts invisible but fondly suffered: the ache of his scalp, his shoulder where Will's nails were cushioned by the fabric of his shirt. His arms, too-long contorted behind his head to grip the seat. His chest, where Will held him down and took everything from Hannibal's body that he desired.

He had thought of Will as a demon once—a creature of pride, of indulgence and sin. He had thought about what it might be like to share space with such a being, to claim it as his own. And in some distant, roundabout way, he thought he understood what it would mean to be claimed in return by someone as fierce and unyielding as he.

In a word, humbling. Sobering. Enlightening.

He had not expected the necessity of submitting to the wild young thing he welcomed into his life. He had not expected to be hunted, captured, and conquered. Before Will, he would have said such a thing was not even possible. That he is fundamentally immovable. But it seems that Will is his equal and opposite, his unstoppable force—and Hannibal is not sure whether it was his own willingness that allowed Will to overcome him, or whether Will has truly become something so fearsome that the triumph is all his.

He can't be certain. Not right now, when his body still aches so pleasantly, when his mind is still full of scent and sensation. He is relaxed against his better judgement; even the usual biological effects of orgasm don't seem to compare to the state he finds himself in presently. Heavy limbs. A distant ache within his ribs. A listless melancholy that he would gladly crush, grind and season and stuff and consume like so much meat.

Whether that melancholy is due to Will, or due to his absence, is something Hannibal is not yet sure, and is not in the state of mind to deeply reflect upon.

He turns the water on, and the glass walls of the shower congeal with steam as he steps in and closes the door behind him—a fragile barricade between himself and the outside, between his thoughts and the proof of his long-held superiority to the likes of lesser men.

But Will is not lesser. Nor is he entirely a man. But his mind is persistent in its thoughts of placing Will opposite him, in seeing him as a newly-realized threat, despite the fact that Hannibal—

—loves him. Hannibal loves him. And he trusts Will's love of him as surely as he can still feel everywhere Will touched him; enough that he can imagine Will's presence here so clearly, with loving arms around his waist, a soft and slender chest against his back, tender lips against the nape of his neck. But as his muscles yield and his spine slumps under that phantom touch, as the water pours over his head and soaks his body in untempered heat, Hannibal is fully aware that he is alone.

He washes his hair, and the smell of his shampoo reminds him of Will curled in his bed. He rinses the sweat and grime and tacky, drying come from his belly and groin, and a distant, animal part of his brain protests the loss of his scent. He cleanses his scrapes and bruises, but it isn't enough to rouse his brain from the fog in which it languishes.

It is an unwelcome sensation—the feeling of being so thoroughly claimed, and so thoughtlessly discarded. Even knowing it's not the truth doesn't free him, even remembering the length of time Will spent curled around him in the driver's seat, nuzzling and nurturing. He'd forgotten what it was to be taken care of. It's been more than two decades since he allowed himself the vulnerability to *submit* to that care.

But then, of course, came Will Graham.

Hannibal turns the water off.

He emerges from the shower with pinkened flesh, covered in marks that smart and sting. He touches each of them as he dresses; assesses in a distant, thoughtless way whether any of them need to be bandaged. They don't, for surely he'd know by now if they did. But there's a familiarity in looking at them. In the proof of Will's claim of him, mind and body, heart and soul.

The instincts that have carried Hannibal to adulthood rail against any thought of ownership, no matter how mutual. They demand his rebellion, a veritable coup against Will's influence. But the deeper part

of him, the part that knows blood and death and has seen its equal in a lover, knows intrinsically that this panic is arising because it's *far* too late.

He built this bridge. *He* did it. He created the link between Will Graham's life and his own, and in his hubris, believed there would be no consequences. No changes to his sense of self. Even what little he saw from a distance could not be fully beholden until it is screaming in every silence left by Will's absence.

He will not see Will tomorrow; not until the evening of the day after. And it's not a time frame that's insurmountable, or even unreasonable, but it *aches.*

He goes to bed. He doesn't dress, but climbs in between cold sheets and turns his back to the place Will usually lies beside him.

And then he turns over.

He stares at that space. It's been far too long since Will last slept here for the sheets to hold any trace of his scent, but Hannibal's nostrils flare as he inhales, regardless. There's nothing, and that's unbearable. No trace of Will left on his skin, or—

Hannibal crawls out of bed. Goes to the hamper to dig out his ruined shirt, then holds it to his nose. Inhales deeply, and… *there.* Hidden among the heavy scent of sweat and sex and his own aftershave is the scent of something both foreign and familiar. The sweet depth of vanilla soap that clings to his skin, artificial peaches in each curl of his hair. The smooth, mild musk of Will's come. Evidence of his lust, his love, his desire, exponentially enhanced by the scant, coppery traces of blood left behind by his claws.

He can't abide bringing dirty laundry into his bed, no matter how strong the desire is. So Hannibal sucks the scent as far into his lungs as he can accomplish, and then sets it aside on the bench at the foot of the mattress.

Maybe the suit can be saved, but the shirt can always be replaced.

He returns to bed and smooths his hand over the place where Will should be. Not for the first time, Hannibal is fraughtfully aware of what he stands to lose if Will should turn away from him. And it is with a deep, resentful ache that he realizes how much of himself would be lost in the process.

He wonders if he could survive it.

But he doesn't have to wonder.

The next day passes, and Hannibal doesn't reach out. Will knows he's retreating within himself, pulling back in the wake of how exposed he allowed himself to be. It's an understandable reaction for a man as solitary by nature as the Ripper; opening up is exposing himself to a threat. Showing his bones in such a way is a liability, and a damning one now that he's seen the violence that coils in Will's veins from up close.

He wanted this. He stoked it in Will, but didn't expect what he received. Hannibal believed he was nurturing a fledgling from the dark, not uncaging one already fully formed. The irony is astounding,

considering Hannibal's own implications of Will's character in the very love letter he wrote to Will's inner monster. But Will can't hold it against him. After all, with his carefully-crafted innocent ignorance and the frightened pleas he made via his postings on *Analysis,* could he really have expected Hannibal to know better?

No. But he may have expected the Ripper to know better. And reconciling the omnipresence of the Ripper with the reality of a man as frightfully brilliant but stubbornly blind as Hannibal Lecter is one that has been an exercise in mediating expectations.

It's with that realization that Will knows what he has to do to mend this distance, and close it once and for all.

Hannibal has shown Will his heart. And now Will must be prepared to knowingly sacrifice his own—not coaxed from him by gentle manipulation, or handed away by a naive and infatuated young thing who thinks himself in love.

No. Hannibal has hunted for him. Provided for him. And it's Will's turn to prove himself, to return the favor.

One monster to another.

From the moment Hannibal confirms what time he'll be arriving, Will is anxious. He paces the house with a low-grade frenetic energy that makes even Winston nervous. Even distracting himself with dinner prep only lasts so long until it's put in the oven. Everything is as clean as Will can make it, but that doesn't undo the shabby second-hand nature of most of his belongings (minus Margot's wardrobe; by no comparison, the finest things he owns). It doesn't change the stains on the kitchen table, or the chips in the ceramic sinks. Scrubbing away the dust and dirt doesn't change Will as a person. In fact, maybe it only reveals his true nature.

Wilhelmina embodies the dark things inside Will, but she doesn't embody his past. The memories that linger are all his own. He shares them with no one, outside her dispassionate eye for rewatching them as they're projected on the canvas of his mind.

Until he met Hannibal, this life was all he expected. In truth, all he wanted.

It's almost impossible to shake the voice of worry that whispers that his outside has been polished to gleaming, but his foundations are unstable. Unrefined. That beneath the perfect partner he has become for a powerful socialite like the esteemed Doctor Hannibal Lecter, this will somehow reveal him in a way that is left wanting, couch-bed and all.

And there it sits in the corner of the room, unassuming. Plain and brown once the cushions are on it. In fact, the cushioned seats look almost new, since it was never actually used as a couch. It has always been Will's bed; the pillows have always lived in the hall closet. Where he can see the wear is the cushioned back, squished down and asymmetrical from years of Will leaning back against it while doing homework, while reading, playing cards, lounging with Winston in quiet contemplation.

Like this, it's almost unnoticeable. It fades into obscurity beneath the details of the other furniture in the room, the old armchair, Will's fly-tying station, his makeup table and vanity mirror. The floor-to-

ceiling bookshelves of dogeared American classics, book-ended with ceramic dog figurines. The upright piano with faded varnish, brutally close to the wood-burning fireplace, and subject to the unkind whims and fluctuations in temperature of the drafty living space. The old painting mounted above the mantle. The gun safe in the corner that easily weighs four times as much as Will, and the stack of entomology encyclopedias that are piled atop it, too tall and too bulky to sit nicely with the other texts. All things more interesting than the place in the room that knows the shape and weight of Will's body and all the ways it's changed in the last three years of his residency here, in a way he has never so much as touched the room upstairs.

But then he hears the sound of wheels crunching on the gravel drive, and everything is unnoticeable. He feels small and silly in his threadbare jeans and green henley, still as clean-shaven and pretty as he had been, but with his hair piled atop his head in a rough bun, dressed down like a homebody. Which he is. He always has been. But there's an anxiety to his bare feet stuffed inside moccasin slippers that he's never had to suffer in his own home before, even though he knows Hannibal wouldn't want him to worry—

Will pulls a heavy flannel on, and Winston rouses at the sound of the Bentley, scrabbling at the door. With Will in his orbit, he knows better than to bark, but he whines. Ears perked, tail wagging with excitement and alarm at the stranger in his territory.

Well. No time like the present.

Will opens the door; Winston bolts out, and he's too well-trained to jump, but he's curious by nature and always has been. Will follows, emerging onto the porch and he shivers; the sun is falling in the sky, descending over the horizon, and soon it'll be dark. The hunt will commence before sunrise.

Hannibal looks through the driver's side window as he parks the car; frowns slightly at the animal he sees, then looks up and makes eye contact with Will. Against his better judgement, Will hides a smile behind his hand. That, at least, seems to appease Hannibal enough to pop open the door and get out of the car.

Winston is on him instantly, nose to Hannibal's pants, tail wagging as he lifts his head and nudges insistently. Will frowns at the behavior; it's more bossy than Winston normally gets with strangers, but Hannibal eyes him, then reaches into his pocket and—

It's a strange feeling, this dark amusement. But from the moment Hannibal pulls a piece of what looks like jerky from his pocket, Will knows exactly what is about to be fed to his dog. But he likes to push, too, so he says, "What, did you stop at the gas station?"

Hannibal's eyes flash as he looks up, but it melts into amused exasperation in a second when he reads the humor in Will's casual slouch. "They were out of pepperoni. I had to make due with something of my own."

With that, some of the anxiety abates. Will can't help but smile as he hops down over the stairs and approaches, the rubber soles of his slippers crunching over the ice as Will nudges Winston aside with his calf and wraps himself in Hannibal's arms. And though he's been at the house for hours since class let out, *this* feels like coming home.

"Hi," Will murmurs and leans up to press the greeting against Hannibal's mouth. One lingering kiss, and then another for good measure. Hannibal's eyes on him are still slightly shuttered, but peering out from behind that veil, still being sewn back together. Will wants to rip it down, but he resists. For now. "D'you bring a bag?"

“It’s in the trunk,” Hannibal replies. He watches as Will retreats, pops the trunk, and hoists the satchel onto his shoulder. His lips purse, but he doesn’t outright argue; he knows that Will is even less likely to concede to his whims within the comfort of his own environment. At least Will can give him credit for awareness.

The door closes heavily, and Will sidles past him and Winston, who for all intents and purposes looks like he’s made a new best friend. He heads for the porch, and Hannibal trails along behind, his footsteps interspersed with the eager jingling of a collar and tags.

Will climbs the steps, then turns to wait. Hannibal’s head tilts, standing at the foot of the steps. Not even yet at the threshold, and he bears the appearance of a monster looming, waiting for permission to enter the domain of their unsuspecting prey.

A nervous flutter fills Will’s chest, but it isn’t fear. He holds out his hand, and Hannibal climbs the three short steps to the top. With the other, Will opens the door, and, stepping carefully around Winston, leads him inside.

The door clicks behind them; the living room brings light, the scent of roasting fish, and Hannibal noticeably perks up. His nostrils flare, even as his eyes curiously and ravenously take in his surroundings. Will swallows as he kicks off his slippers onto the boot tray and sets Hannibal’s bag on a chair just inside the door. Hannibal crouches to untie his shoes, and Will holds out his hands expectantly. “I can take your coat.”

Hannibal huffs an exhale gently through his nose, even as he steps out of the leather oxfords. “Was it not yourself who said that if we are family, then you should not be considered a guest in my home, but a resident?”

Will flexes his fingers, insistent. And as Hannibal stands, he gently closes his hands around the lapels. Tugs, just a little. “Yeah, but I know where your closet is. Off.”

Hannibal huffs a breath and rolls his shoulders back; shrugs the weighted wool into Will’s hands, though pins him with a wry glance. He is, yet again, unfortunately handsome in black slacks and a subtly-patterned button down in deep gray. “Show me where it is, then, so I can take care of it myself next time.”

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but there’s not many places to hide things in this house,” Will replies, amused. Still, he inclines his head toward the narrow hallway, and Hannibal follows. Hangs the coat on a heavy plastic hanger and hooks it on a tension bar, set above plastic storage totes on the floor; far from a mounted metal hook, or even wood. He huffs softly and tries to put the difference from his mind. “I hope this isn’t the coat you plan to wear hunting.”

Hannibal’s hand brushes Will’s lower back as he closes the door of the closet; Will reaches back to wind their fingers together, then tugs him toward the kitchen. “No, I brought another that’s easier to move in and more suitable to inclement weather.”

Will bites down on a pleased purr before it can escape. *Easier to move in.* It’s so easy to imagine Hannibal on the prowl. It’s something Will is keenly anticipatory to see in person, no matter the context. “Good. I want to be out of here before sunrise, and it’s gonna be damn cold.”

“I should have everything I need.”

His eyes are sharp, assessing as they enter the kitchen—though not with judgement, but rather his rapt attentiveness. Old white cabinets, scratched wooden countertops. A gas range tucked beneath an old

vent hood which rattles and wheezes when in operation; Will more often cracks the window over the sink than actually turns it on. The fridge, an old top-freezer affair with cracked door bins held together with duct tape.

Will presses his lips together, doesn't look directly at Hannibal; he was determined to show no self-consciousness regarding this house that he's held together in his father's absence, and has done a damn good job of it, if he says so himself. He's learned more than he ever thought he could about carpentry and plumbing from fixing things gone awry. He's always been mechanically inclined, but sometimes an engine is an engine and a broken door is a broken door. One of these things is not like the others.

And in that sense, he's done okay. He won't be embarrassed, even though he knows it's a certain level of homeliness that is vintage to the point of being outdated. There's a lot of things he would do differently if he had the money and the time to make it his own. Instead, until recently, he had coasted on what little financial security he had and allowed things to run their course, and patched them back together when he could.

Then Hannibal came. Then the Ripper came. Then *Analysis* took off, and now things are just a little bit easier, a little bit better all-around.

He's still just a country kid. He's good at playing the high-class game since he had good teachers, but he's never been and will never *truly* be—

"You seem lost in thought," Hannibal says, and squeezes Will's hand once in his own.

"Ah, yeah." Will laughs it off, snaps out of it. "Just trying to think if I need anything else for dinner."

Hannibal hums his acknowledgement, his interest. "Anything I can assist with?"

Will turns. Inhales, and exhales at the sight of Hannibal standing in his kitchen. Reaches out and rests his hands on Hannibal's shoulders; smooths his thumbs over his collar bones, and feels some tight knot within his chest start to loosen again. "Yeah," he replies. Steps closer. "Kiss me."

Hannibal blinks; something within his gaze cracks as it warms, ice meeting the first spring thaw. He tilts his head, hair drifting into his eyes as he leans down and his nose drifts along Will's, as he brings their lips together once, twice, three times over in slow, sensual kisses.

"I'm glad you're here," Will says softly.

Hannibal blinks. Watches Will's face, attention flickering between his eyes, as if reading the truth there. Then he touches his mouth to the corner of Will's, then to the apple of his cheek. A kiss to his temple. Will makes a quiet sound of affection and pleasure when Hannibal kisses his forehead. "I'm glad you asked me here. It's good to see you, Will."

"I didn't scare you off?"

Another crack. Something truly amused peers through. "No, darling. I somehow think that even God himself could not take me away from you."

Take me away from you, he says. Not *take* ***you*** *away from* ***me.*** It's an interesting distinction, an implicit balance of power placed in Will's hands, rather than his own.

Will's hands slip up, tug him close, and there in Will's kitchen, he tucks himself into Hannibal's embrace and strokes gentle hands through his hair. Rests his forehead against Hannibal's cheek and

holds him for the sake of holding him. Indulges in what he hasn't had since just a few short days ago, but hours that felt like lifetimes.

The slow beating of their hearts feels like peace. The popping and sizzling of the food within the oven, the wind whistling outside, the click of Winston's nails on the floor in the living room, and the quiet chuff of Hannibal's exhalation all combine to create a symphony of sounds that make up *home.* Somewhere that is just slightly more comfortable than the immaculate austerity of Hannibal's home, but made *more* than just Will's domain simply by Hannibal's presence within it.

"He could try," Will whispers.

Hannibal's arms cross behind Will's back, fully encircling him and settling on his hips. He noses at Will's cheek and kisses his jaw, a rumbling purr building within his ribs. A big cat, a dangerous one, lavishing pleased affection on his mate. "And risk your wrath? I don't think he'd dare."

"I said he could try, not that he'd succeed." Will draws his head back. Tilts his neck. Shows his throat, and sees Hannibal's eyes drop to it. He smiles, then trails the blunt edges of his nails over Hannibal's temple, behind his ear, down the side of his neck. He rubs at the broad expanse of one muscled shoulder, and shifts within the bonds of Hannibal's grip until his hands loosen, and Will can extract himself from the comfortable cage of Hannibal's arms. "But in the meantime, I'll settle for me succeeding at dinner."

Hannibal exhales softly, but obligingly steps back as Will gathers the oven mitts and opens the range. He knows he isn't imagining the weight of eyes on his back and ass as he bends and takes the shallow baking dish from the rack and sets it atop the cast iron grates. He closes the oven, turns it off. Huffs through his nose as the space at his side is filled. Hannibal makes an appreciative noise at the sight of the pair of trout, dressed and descaled, bellies stuffed with vibrant slices of lemon, crushed garlic cloves, and fresh dill, laid atop a bed of roasted asparagus and burst cherry tomatoes. The skin is visibly crisp from where it's been sliced open and browned beneath the broiler, gleaming with olive oil and freckled with cracked pepper. Will's no expert, but he knows his fish; knows at the very least it should be flavorful and agreeable, even to Hannibal's refined palette.

"I thought about asking what you wanted, but I figured you wouldn't mind a surprise," Will says with an offhand shrug. He goes to the cupboards to extract a pair of plates, two of the few that actually match. "Hope you like trout. I figured something light, since it's kind of late."

"It smells excellent." Hannibal's eyes gleam with satisfaction.

Will hands over his plate, then reaches for a spatula that's stored beside the stove. Serves out one fish, then the other. Scoops out a generous serving of vegetables for each of them, then spoons the juices pooled in the bottom of the dish over each of the fish. "I'd offer you a drink, but all I've got is cheap whiskey."

Hannibal makes a sound of amusement, then holds out his hand for Will's plate; holds it as Will pulls down a pair of glasses, and only hesitates slightly as he gets ice cubes from the freezer, then fills the cups at the tap. The ice creaks and pops, and Will slips around Hannibal toward the tiny adjacent dining room, the table large enough that it nearly takes up the entire space. There's precious little room in this house, but it's always been just enough for Will to get by. He doubles back for old cutlery and paper napkins; cringes internally, though Hannibal doesn't so much as blink. Rather, he accepts Will's offering with a smile and murmur of thanks; then sits comfortably in the worn old chair at Will's side.

The fish is delicious; the flesh is tender and peels easily back from the bones, bursts with juices and bright notes of citrus across Will's tongue, infused with the taste of garlic and herbs. The vegetables are soft but not soggy, still rich with flavor. Despite the lack of opulence, Hannibal looks truly satisfied, and that soothes something within Will's belly that he hesitates to call inadequacy, simply for the truth of it.

"This is incredibly fresh," Hannibal says, and glances at Will. "More flavorful and firm than farmed specimens. I find the trout to be a very Nietzsche-ian fish. Trials of his wild existence find their way into the flavor of the flesh. You caught them yourself?"

Will nods. "There's a stream not far from here. I prefer fishing to hunting, usually."

Hannibal's eyes gleam with amused satisfaction in the yellowish halogen glow. "Then why hunt at all?"

Will raises a brow. Takes a bite; chews, and swallows. "Under the best circumstances, a fish might give me two or three servings. This time of year, you have to be patient to land a fish. But I know how to hunt, and I have a license—and a deer can feed me for a few weeks if I'm careful. All it costs me is my time and the price of a bullet."

"Fishing in the winter," Hannibal muses. He takes a bite; his expression flickers with faint pleasure at the flavor as he chews and swallows, rends fragile flesh between his teeth. Will wonders if there's any cuts from the human body that can be quite as delicate by certain methods of cooking. He muses in silence over it for a second, before he turns his attention back to Hannibal and inclines his head in acknowledgement. "I've been led to understand that it's much more difficult. The fish lack their usual appetite with their metabolisms slowed."

"It takes patience," Will replies slowly, and reaches for his glass. Sips, with Hannibal's eyes heavy on him all the while, and looks back from beneath his lashes. "But a lot of good things take patience. Any hunter worth his kill has to be just as patient."

It's not expressly true. Hunters must be strong and fast and know when to strike. But there's no striking out at a fish not interested in biting. There is only the bait and the lure.

Will is a master of both.

But Hannibal preens under the subtle flattery, all lax limbs and warm amusement. His initial wariness is finally thawing and breaking open under the weight of Will's regard. It's a beautiful sight. "Don't sell your skill short, Will," he says. "It's not simply patience, or anyone could do it."

Will sends him a sidelong look. Smiles sweetly, and rolls his head back; makes a show of stretching, his neck popping. Then he sighs. Relaxes. And inside his ribs, the affection and warm humor grow. The surface of the pond ripples, and the predator follows the scent of a good meal. "How do you catch a fish who isn't hungry?"

Hannibal smiles in return. He takes a sip from his water, a slow consideration. "That is the question, isn't it?"

Will's smile grows. "You have to use live bait." Hannibal's eyes flash, and Will gestures noncommittally to the picked-over carcass of the trout on his own plate. "You have to make them bite, even though they're not hungry. You're right—their metabolisms drop in the cold. But they're predators. Even when they're cold, they're always predators. You have to excite them to action."

Will sighs, a breathy little thing. He considers the fish, and the hours in the frigid winter air it took to reel them toward his lure. Time well spent, if only for this moment, here and now.

Against his better judgement, Will thinks of Abel Gideon. Suddenly, his humor is not quite so gentle, so kind. “You have to create a reality where only you and the fish exist. Where your lure becomes what he wants most, despite everything he knows.”

When he looks up, Hannibal’s expression is openly considering, though there’s a shadow in his eyes. Suspicion, maybe. His monster’s instincts reacting to the reality of what Will’s saying, but the fiercely loved and deeply prideful nature of Hannibal’s mind simply won’t allow him to believe anyone else could get the better of him.

It’s fortunate Will loves him so dearly. If he didn’t, this would be a very different conversation.

He smiles. Laughs, and reaches back to rub at the nape of his neck. Softens his slouch, and casts Hannibal a glance that is honestly and openly adoring. “Listen to me—I sound so pretentious. It’s really not that complicated; a fish is a fish. It’s more about the location than it is anything deep or existential. You just have to know where they nest to drop your line. Hell, that’s why so many guys nowadays use sonar.”

“Talentless,” Hannibal murmurs with subtle but discernible distaste. “If one does not possess the skill to track and kill their quarry without technological assistance, they don’t adequately respect the life they’re taking.”

Will looks at him. Rolls the words on his tongue before he speaks them. “I don’t disagree,” he says carefully. “I think having a Vexilar is cheating—if you’re a sport fisherman. But if you fish for food, if you *rely* on that animal to feed your family and yourself… I think there are extenuating circumstances.” Will toys with the end of his fork and feels Hannibal’s attention return to him. “Fate can be cruel. Climate change and migration patterns shifting led to the destruction of entire cultures. In the end, mankind is the bigger fish.”

Will considers his own words again. He looks up, and meets Hannibal’s gaze, and knows exactly who is staring back at him.

“Using an advantage like that to kill for the sake of killing is a waste committed by cowards. But if you kill to eat…”

Will reaches for a cherry tomato and picks it up between his fingers. Casually, rudely, he pops it into his mouth and crushes it between his teeth. Chews, and swallows.

“…it’s just survival of the fittest.”

Hannibal’s eyes are red as chum in the water. They linger on Will’s throat. “How right you are,” he murmurs, and though they only just ate, he looks starved.

The dishes go quickly; it’s the benefit of baking in one pan, and having someone at his side to dry as Will washes. Hannibal is as capable in Will’s kitchen as he is in his own. He learns the lay of the land quickly, and within minutes seems to know where everything goes, and where anything can be found.

It's helpful, and in some way, almost comforting. Indeed, in not very long at all, Hannibal moves like he is perfectly at home within Will's space; no longer a guest in this house he has never stepped foot in before tonight.

Once dinner is finished and everything put away, Will is halfway into the living room and prepared to start a fire as he does each evening, when—

"What time would you like to go to bed, mylimasis?"

Will freezes. It's not late—maybe eight-thirty or nine, but if they're to be up before sunrise, logic would dictate resting sooner rather than later if they're aiming for a full night's sleep. It normally wouldn't be an issue to start a fire and doze in its presence, but tonight, he's not sleeping in his own bed. And to set a fire downstairs and leave it unattended would be foolish.

Will laughs, a forced sound as he looks back. He shrugs lightly, and pushes himself up. Winston turns his dark, warm eyes to Will, ears cocked—he doesn't understand the difference in routine, and makes a grumbling sort of whine like old dogs make as he settles down, but keeps his eyes on his master.

"Didn't think about it," Will murmurs. "You're right, probably soon."

Hannibal's eyes are just as dark. He blinks, and his head tilts to the side. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

Will hopes his smile doesn't seem strained; he reaches out and touches Hannibal's arm as he passes, retrieving Hannibal's bag from where he left it by the front door. Hannibal reaches to take it from Will, and casually hoists it over his shoulder.

"Not interrupting," Will replies with forced ease. "We can get ready now. Won't hurt to get an early night. The main bathroom is down here, or there's a half-bath upstairs."

"Upstairs will do just fine. I showered after my shift earlier and can do so again when we return tomorrow." He smiles faintly, conspiratorially at Will. "Ideally triumphant."

Between the two of them, Will feels poorly for any deer that crosses their path. He bites out a smile as he turns the lights off in the living room; Winston sits up again as they head for the kitchen and the staircase behind it. Hannibal glances at him, but follows Will as he goes: turning off lights, though not bothering to double-check the doors. Up the narrow staircase that climbs to the small upstairs room and tiny bathroom that is barely more than a converted closet; enough room to turn around in, with a toilet and sink and medicine cabinet, and a tiny casement window.

At the end of the hallway that is barely long enough to lie down in is the door to the bedroom, already open.

Will's steps stutter for a moment; Hannibal nearly runs into him, unsuspecting, and that pushes Will into moving again, too quickly for Hannibal to ask him if everything's alright, because it's not. It's not, but it has to be.

He turns the light on; the bedroom isn't large, but it's clean—a queen sized bed that Will shoved away from the wall and into the center of the room so there would be access for both of them. A tall but narrow dresser with a mirror atop it, beside a tiny closet door that's not good for much else than a handful of hangers. No rug; Will had gotten rid of it after his dad passed, and packed all the rest of the stuff up. Now it's unpacked, and he's pretending it's his.

Will feels like an intruder.

He goes to the right side of the bed, because that's the side he sleeps on in Hannibal's bed. He doesn't know what to do with this room other than pretend he knows exactly what he's doing. He feels the weight of Hannibal's eyes on him as he turns to the dresser, extracts pair of sweatpants softened by age and an oversized tee shirt with a logo of a clam boat. The upstairs is far colder than he's ever been near the fire, and—

"I'm gonna brush my teeth," Will replies. "I'll be right back."

Hannibal makes a sound of acknowledgement, and Will slips into the hall—

His toothbrush is downstairs. *Fuck.* It's definitely too much to ask for that Hannibal won't hear him. Maybe he can pass it off as something else.

He sticks his head back through the doorway, and sees Hannibal carefully, patiently extracting the contents of his bag. The sight of it eases something in Will's chest, if only a little. He's pinned with a questioning look, and rushes to head it off. "I forgot to let Winston out for the night. I'll just be a minute."

Hannibal blinks. Considers Will in the glow of the lamplight, then inclines his head in understanding. "Of course."

Will turns to go, but—

"Will."

A silent breath of dread. Will thinks he hides it well as he turns back and asks, maybe too brightly, "Yeah?"

Hannibal's gaze is dark. Considering. Contemplative. "I hope you're not discomfited by my presence in your home. And if you were, I would hope you'd confide in me so we could work through it together."

No. No. How can Will explain that the inadequacy raised by Hannibal's presence is negligible when the ghost of his father's voice is permeating every inch of this room they're about to share? How could he ever—"I'm not." He licks his lips. "Discomfited. Uncomfortable. It's an adjustment, to have you here, but it's not… bad." Will lowers his eyes. Breathes the truth as he fidgets with the hem of a shirt that's known him for far longer than Hannibal has. "I want you here. I'm *glad* you're here. I promise I'd tell you if I wasn't, and if I didn't."

Hannibal breathes silently for a moment. Then he sighs, so very gently. He offers a quirk of a smile that's not quite a smile at all, but undeniably fond. "If you're sure."

"I'm sure," Will says. Yet, he flees from the room. Down the stairs. Places his clothes on the kitchen counter as he opens the door simply so Hannibal can hear him do so, but when he turns around, Winston is standing there. He stares at Will, and his whole heart clenches with guilt.

Silently, he opens the door again. "Go," Will whispers, and Winston does. Then he picks up the dog bowl and carries it, with his clothes, to the downstairs bathroom.

He brushes his teeth as quickly as he can while also being thorough. With the tap winter-cold, Will dumps what dregs remained and fills it with fresh water. Sets it on the closed toilet seat as he changes. Lets his hair down, wets his hands, and finger-combs his flyaways back into a perfunctory bun. Whether it's neat or not probably doesn't matter, but it matters. Will balls his discarded clothes in the

crook of his arm, and holds the dog bowl in the other. Puts it back. Lets Winston in. Crouches. Pets him, rubs his cheeks, and inhales and exhales and hopes like hell he'll make it through the night.

Will swallows at the quiet whine that follows him as he retreats upward, and tries to ignore the memories of the nights when Winston used to sleep at the foot of his father's bed. He hates that it feels like he's denying both his dog and himself. "No, buddy," Will murmurs. "Go lie down."

Winston stares, and his judgement follows Will all the way back upstairs.

When he reaches the bedroom, Hannibal has changed into soft-looking pajamas and seems to have unpacked; he's hanging something up in the closet, and his bag is empty on the bed, though there's a faint pull between his brows like he's considering something heavily. The sight of it makes Will swallow hard.

"Everything okay?" Will asks.

Hannibal doesn't answer immediately. But when he turns to Will, sees him framed within the doorway, he nods. "Is Winston settled?"

Will bites the inside of his cheek. "As much as he's gonna be, yeah." God, it's cold up here. He shivers, and Hannibal's eyes snap to him. He shrugs preemptively; it's interrupted by a shiver.

Hannibal closes the closet door; holds out a hand and draws Will closer, into his arms. Against his chest. Head tucked under his chin. It's the most comfortable Will's been all night. "You have a chill, darling. Is there a thermostat upstairs?"

Will shakes his head, and Hannibal exhales gently through his nose. "Alright. Get in bed, then."

Will nods in silence, but doesn't withdraw; his face is tucked into Hannibal's shoulder and the thought of lying on that bed—

Hannibal nudges his waist with the backs of his knuckles. "Go on."

Will sets the bundled clothes atop the dresser and climbs in. It's cold between the sheets; they're not flannel here like they were downstairs, and the quilt on the old bed isn't nearly thick or heavy enough to help him feel warm. Even when the mattress dips and Hannibal crawls in beside him, molds his body to Will's back, it's not quite enough.

He shivers. Shudders. In a matter of seconds, his teeth are chattering, and Hannibal's face is pressed against Will's neck, his arms around Will's waist so tightly it feels like he can't take a full breath. "Will, you're shaking."

"I-it'll pass," Will whispers.

He wishes he sounded more sincere; Hannibal's disbelief is just as loud, just as blatant.

"Will."

Will is silent, but even his silence right now isn't silence. It's stuttered breaths and clicking teeth, a rattling that echoes inside his bones.

"You're preoccupied. You're evasive. I want to help you, mylimasis, and I know there's something wrong, but I cannot help you if you don't tell me what it is."

There's so much to unpack with that sentence that Will doesn't even know where to begin. But from the tone of Hannibal's voice, he can't imagine Hannibal suspects he knows the truth—there would be more defensiveness, more evasion. This, though. This sounds like a plea disguised as reason. It sounds like the wounded ego of a man who has been vulnerable and is denied that vulnerability in turn.

Will ducks his head. Presses his face fully against the pillow, until even the shudder of his breathing cannot be heard. Pushes back against Hannibal's body like Will could be absorbed by him and his heat if he tried hard enough—like they could become one person, consumed by darkness, stalking footprints through the shadows that certainly don't belong to deer.

He could lie. But he already made the decision not to, and telling the truth now protects the image that he's unable to lie under pressure. It's an eye for an eye. A heart for a heart.

"This isn't my room," Will whispers. "Or my bed. I got it clean because I knew you were coming. I didn't want you to see the way I live."

Hannibal's hand spreads wide and warm over Will's sternum. "How you live?"

Will nods in silence. Then he lifts his head. Taps the back of Hannibal's hand with the tips of his fingers to disengage him, then rolls in his arms until their eyes meet in the dark. He can barely stand to look, and his stomach flutters with nerves—the persistent sensation that has never really left, that Will is much too simple, and Hannibal in all his refined elegance is much too good for him.

"The couch downstairs pulls out into a bed," he confesses softly. "My bed."

Hannibal does nothing. Doesn't react, but for to ask, "And this bed?"

"Was my dad's," Will replies in a whisper. "It was wrapped in sheet plastic until this week. I…" He inhales through his nose, then leans forward to touch his forehead to Hannibal's shoulder. "I've never slept up here before. Ever. I don't know how to, and it's cold, and I don't like it. I live in the living room. But I didn't want to force you to do that for me. And I didn't want you to sleep on the couch. I wanted to… maybe look like I had my shit more together than I do."

Hannibal sighs, long and slow. He doesn't sound disappointed, or even particularly surprised. He touches his mouth to Will's temple and presses a quick kiss there. "I thought it might be something like that."

Will waits. Waits until the silence stretches, and though he could wait it out until it breaks, he allows himself to squirm under the pressure of it. "You didn't say anything."

"I wanted you to tell me yourself." Oh, the irony of *that,* Will thinks. "And though my back thanks you, darling, I didn't come here for you to show me what you thought I wanted to see. I came here to see you, and to share your space. *Your* space."

Will swallows hard. Then he pushes back, pushes up, and he shivers so hard it shakes his spine when he reaches for the antique bedside lamp and flicks it on, one dim little bulb that would barely be enough to read by for the person right beside it. It's just enough to make out the details of Hannibal's face as he braces himself on his arm, hair falling into his face as he looks at Will. Imploring eyes. A soft and open expression, as he reaches out to touch Will's waist where the shirt has ridden up.

"What do we do?" Will asks.

“That depends. How do you want to handle this?” Hannibal replies patiently. “We could stay up here—though I don’t think you would sleep well outside of your usual environment. Sleeping poorly is not conducive to handling a firearm. We could also go back downstairs.”

Will grimaces and averts his eyes. “The couch really… isn’t good.”

“And I’ll admit I’m not keen to sleep on it. Perhaps a compromise?” Hannibal sits up. The old blankets pool around him, thin and not warm in the least. Will curses himself; if he’d slept up here even one night before tonight, he’d have known how inadequate the bedsheets were. His own shortsightedness.

Will sighs softly. His hands tremble with the chill that persists inside him, and he can barely bring himself to look Hannibal in the eyes, but he does. “What do you have in mind?”

Hannibal spreads one hand out over the old quilt, a momentary flicker of distraction. Then he glances over toward Will, and then toward his own side of the room. Looks to the door, and back to the bed. “If you’re not opposed to the bed itself, between the two of us, I’m sure we could get the mattress downstairs. It’s not perfect, of course, but I’m sure the floor would provide adequate support for one night, and we could bring the frame down tomorrow.”

For a moment, Will doesn’t breathe. Then, quietly, “You’d sleep on the floor with me?”

Hannibal looks both amused and fond at that. His fingers skim over the switched fabric, the mosaic textile, until he finds Will’s hand in the blankets and covers it with his own. “It’s hardly the same—but I think there’s no shortage of things I would do for you, Will. If it would help you to rest, and if you would be more comfortable, I think it’s a simple and attainable solution to our problem.”

It’s undeniably practical. It’s so simple. It’s almost laughably simple, and yet—

“Yeah,” Will whispers. Finds his voice, and nods. “Yeah. Let’s do that.”

He crawls out of bed, his legs so weak beneath him that they nearly give out. He peels the quilt back, the old and stiff sheets. Tosses them on the floor. Kicks them aside. The bed frame is little more than interlocking pieces of cast iron; it won’t be hard to move, but that’s a problem for tomorrow. Tonight’s ordeal is just this: getting the mattress downstairs, to the living room.

And as soon as they’re up, as soon as they’re moving, the exertion brings heat to Will’s muscles. And with the heat comes words, and with the words comes the running of his mouth, and really, there’s only so much he can do to cope tonight, so he talks.

“I packed the room after he died,” Will says as they lift the mattress over the side of the frame, stripped bare of even the mattress pad and bottom sheet. There aren’t handles to hold, so they push it, and it slides across the old wood floors. “I always lived downstairs. There was only one bedroom, but I didn’t care. We’d shared smaller spaces. When we moved here, this was all he could afford. Working for the Vergers was a good living while it lasted. He was paying down the mortgage and saving up for something else, but nothing sells quick around here. There were a bunch of things he wanted to fix that he never got around to, and when I talked to the lawyer after he died, he told me there was pretty much no way it’d sell. So that savings was the only reason why I could afford to keep it and stay in school.”

Halfway down the staircase, Hannibal looks up at Will and tilts his head, eyes bright as he absorbs every syllable, every letter spilled across the floor that reveals Will’s past. “While it lasted,” he muses.

“Your father didn’t work for the Vergers toward the end of his life, and yet you and Margot remain friends.”

Will bumps the mattress down another step, another two, and keeps it from slamming into the walls. It’s about all he can do. “Yeah.” Will’s not usually the type to fill silences over letting them linger, but he doesn’t want them to linger tonight. The silence, like the cold, deserves to be banished to the furthest corners of this house. Away from him, chased down and destroyed by Hannibal. So he talks. “I was still in puberty when Dad started working on the Verger Estate. I was small, you know. Skinny. Tiny. With my hair grown out, they thought I was a girl, so we let them.”

Hannibal blinks. Will pushes the mattress down the last few steps until they are on even ground in the kitchen.

“Margot’s dad had suspicions that she preferred girls. And he thought she and I had a thing. Mason’s always been a pig who picks on weaker, smaller kids—so he thought he’d push me around. He tried to intimidate me when I was changing after working on the yachts. Imagine his surprise when he found out I wasn’t a little girl he could push around.”

Will smiles. It’s an ugly, angry thing, full of memory and bitterness. It’s tempered only by the slide of fabric; the click of Winston’s nails on the floor as he curiously comes to investigate, and the jingle of his collar as he skitters out of the way.

“Well, Molson Verger’s a man of God. And my dad’s a blue-collar working man from New Orleans. He thought it’d be an easy sell to convince my dad to let him pay to send me and Margot to conversion therapy. Pray the gay away, and all that.”

Hannibal stops. Will bumps the mattress into him and mumbles an apology, but it goes unheard. “Conversion therapy has an extremely high rate of failure, and a comorbidly high rate of youth suicide.”

“I know,” Will says softly.

Hannibal makes a quiet, terrible sound.

“He didn’t, though,” Will adds. “Take the offer. Obviously. He actually pretty loudly and publicly *denied* that offer. Shamed Molson Verger for trying to change God’s design, painting his own child as a sinner and not acknowledging or atoning for his own. Molson couldn’t in good conscience send her away when everyone would think he was a bad Christian for it—but my dad got fired, obviously. We were both barred from the grounds, and Margot’s dad tried to tell her she couldn’t be my friend anymore. He ruined my dad’s reputation professionally, so he just did odd jobs for whoever needed someone to do them. Farm people don’t really give a shit about what a billionaire has to say, anyway.”

Hannibal doesn’t move. He’s still and silent in the dark, up until the moment Will nudges the mattress with his foot. He doesn’t startle, but he twitches, which is as good as.

“Hey. I’m alright. It was a long time ago, and it’s over and done.”

Hannibal takes a breath. Lets it out. Nods once, a shadow without a face. Pulls, and they start to move again; traversing the short hallway between the kitchen, dining room, and living room. Will turns on the light, and they put the mattress on the rug that the sleeper sofa usually is propped upon. Put the head of the mattress up against the foot of the couch, a makeshift headboard. And then they make one last trip upstairs; Hannibal collects his belongings from the closet, and Will scoops up the mattress pad and the sheets and bundles them in his arms, trailing on the floor behind him like a child with a

blanket as Hannibal turns the light off and closes the door and shuts the ghost of Beau Graham's voice back within its rightful resting place.

It's so much easier to breathe once Will's feet are back on the floor. He all but collapses to his knees to redress the bed, and only gets up again once it's straightened. He shows Hannibal to the hall closet and pulls out a plastic tote—unearths *his* blankets, worn pieces of fleece and flannel and boiled wool, multicolored knit monstrosities that were gifted to them by the well-meaning older ladies at church who simply put together any bit of yarn they had on hand. Will carries them all to the bed, dumps them atop it, and tosses his pillows on for good measure.

Then he goes to the fireplace and lights it with that same useless real estate circular and a few small logs so it can crackle and glow and warm the space that is already chasing the shivers from Will's bones.

Hannibal comes to him, then. He stands behind Will as he kneels before the fire, and it's just like every time before, except this time feels like benediction, like acceptance and love as he holds out his hand and Will takes it—as he's pulled to his feet and into Hannibal's embrace, touched and pet and kissed in the dull reddish glow of his own living room by the monstrously beautiful man that has rewritten every idea of what Will has ever known as home.

"Come to bed, my love," he murmurs against Will's cheek, and Will does.

When they crawl under the blankets, there's a breathless moment of situating the nest of fabric and scent and familiarity. It creates soft walls around their bodies, impermanent confines to relax into, with each other at the center. Will jostles and situates himself until he is no longer cold, paws at Hannibal's shirt until he chuckles and shrugs it off, sets it on the floor at their side. Until a steady heartbeat thrums beneath Will's ear, and Hannibal's heated palms slip beneath his shirt in return.

"Is this better?" Hannibal asks quietly as he touches Will's spine, skims the blunt edges of his fingernails up and down in a way that makes Will shiver, but has nothing to do with the cold; perhaps only the lack thereof.

"So much better," Will whispers. He lapses into silence. Closes his eyes, and turns his face to nuzzle at Hannibal's chest, the gentle scratch of body hair and blood-warm skin, the scent of him. He slips an arm over Hannibal's waist, tucked in along his ribs, and pushes one leg over and between until they're tangled together. He's sure once the fire's heat permeates the living room and the blankets trap the air around their bodies, he'll be suffocating in the warmth. But right now, he won't settle for anything less than this, right here and now.

Will presses his lips to Hannibal's sternum and sighs.

"I don't want you to feel you have to hide from me," Hannibal murmurs. Will opens his eyes, and simply listens. "Whatever notions you have of what you think I expect—I have no expectations for what you should be. Only the desire to see you fully, and to share completely in your life."

"I desire nothing, but for everything you are." Will doesn't look up, but his arm around Hannibal tightens. "I wasn't trying to hide. I just wanted to be… more."

"I know." Hannibal's hands splay over Will's back. "But you have no need to be."

The fire crackles. Will's eyes drift half-closed. "Hannibal?"

"Mm?"

“You knew before I went downstairs.”

A moment of quiet. Then, “Yes, I did. But not before we went upstairs.”

“How?”

Hannibal shuffles. He ducks his head, and Will feels Hannibal’s nose against his hair. His inhale lifts Will upon his chest, a swelling wave that gently recedes as he exhales. “In my youth, I realized I had an unusually strong olfactory sense. Your home bears all the markers of being lived in, but the upstairs was clean to the point of sterility. I knew when we crossed the threshold of the bedroom you claimed as your own, but nothing smelled like you.”

Will’s heart flutters, both with affection and shock. If it’s true, then it’s only good luck that has gotten Will through the last few weeks unscathed and uncaught while consorting with his many conspirators, that he only ever met up with them after Hannibal, or on days when he didn’t see Hannibal at all. He’ll have to be twice as careful to keep his advantage moving forward, but this information is invaluable.

He tips his head up to meet Hannibal’s eyes in the near-dark. “That’s really all it took?”

Hannibal tilts his head. The crackling light of the fire catches his eyes and makes them glow like bourbon. He noses at the crown of Will’s head, sweet and strong, and when they kiss, it’s with a slide of lips and tongues that leaves Will feeling hot and near-drunk. “I would know you anywhere, Will. And I would know anywhere you were not.”

What can he say to that? Is there even a reply that’s adequate?

Fortunately, he doesn’t have to come up with an answer, for it’s at that moment that Winston crawls onto the foot of the bed and flops down atop Will’s feet. Hannibal blinks, and lifts himself to look. He frowns, but Will simply sighs and laughs and settles in.

“Don’t bother,” Will mumbles. He closes his eyes. “He won’t budge once he’s comfortable. Old dogs, new tricks.”

“If you insist.” Hannibal, too, settles easily enough after that. Will bites the inside of his cheek to keep himself from laughing. *Old dogs, new tricks.*

“I set an alarm for the morning.” Will arches gently up into the touch of Hannibal’s palms and purrs his satisfaction. “Usually the legal hunting hours are half-hour before sunrise to half-hour after sunset, but most of the woods around here are mine and my neighbor’s. We have an arrangement. So we can go out a little earlier, and as long as we have reflective gear, no one’s gonna have a fuss. It’s the law of the land out here.”

Hannibal hums, and his hand slips up—cradles the nape of Will’s neck, and his thumb brushes over the divots of his teeth left in Will’s skin. His voice is in good humor and lax with contentment as he kisses the crown of Will’s head and murmurs, “I defer to your expertise.”

3:8

Chapter Notes

Please note this chapter contains Will and Hannibal hunting and killing an animal, and all that entails considering, you know, *them*.

Thank you everyone for your continued support and fantastic comments, which I'll be replying to soon!! I know this one took me a bit longer, but hopefully Will and Hannibal won't fight me quite so hard on the next chapter.

Hannibal expected putting the mattress on the floor to be a concession, physical comfort lost in exchange for Will's emotional comfort gained. But when he awakens in the dark in a place that smells like Will, surrounded by texture and warmth and softness, it hardly feels like a sacrifice.

He's uncertain what woke him at first—but realizes soon after with the click of nails on the floor that it's the old dog returning from the kitchen, a shepherd mix that is much more agreeable than Hannibal expected. Perhaps it's the animal's age, or simply the strength of his training. But Winston returns to the living room and flops down with a groan before the smoldering fireplace, and Hannibal's instincts ease with the knowledge that he and Will are contained and safe.

His internal clock tells him it's early morning; reaching over to where he set his phone, the screen lights up and displays *3:57am* in stark white letters. Several hours to sunrise, yet he's uncertain how early Will meant for them to go out. Whether it's worth attempting to doze a while longer, or—

A quiet sound; a stretch of skin and muscle and sinew and bone, and the quiet *pops* to signify a body at rest coming to motion. Will lifts his head from the pillow and blinks, wild-haired and bleary-eyed. "Mmm." Drops his head to the pillow again, and whispers, "What time is it?"

Hannibal reaches for him and rests his hand on Will's waist atop the blankets. "Three fifty-seven."

Will groans softly and rolls onto his back, though frees one arm to cover Hannibal's hand with his own. "I always wake up a few minutes before my alarm. Makes me crazy."

"A signal of a strong sense of internal time, I'm afraid. Both a blessing and a curse."

"What woke you up?" Will mumbles.

Hannibal huffs through his nose. "Winston. I'll admit I'm not used to sharing space with animals."

"You share space with me just fine." Will pushes himself upright before Hannibal is able to answer *that* particular comment, and rolls over to paw at the other side of the mattress for his phone,

presumably to shut down his clock app. “Alright. Up we get.”

Will crawls out of bed on all-fours and gets to his feet; mumbles a warning before he turns on the living room light and illuminates the space. Hannibal blinks as his eyes adjust, as Will pats his thigh and Winston stands at attention, then pads after him to the kitchen. Hannibal stands at the sound of the back door as Will lets the dog out.

“I have coffee from a can or tea that comes in foil packets,” Will calls from the other room, and Hannibal is caught somewhere between a wince and being genuinely amused. “And I still have that cheap whiskey if that improves either one of those at all.”

Hannibal follows him into the kitchen, lived-in and worn, and looks over Will’s shoulder. Will leans back against his chest without even waiting to see if Hannibal will hold him up. He does. “French press?”

Will shakes his head and gestures to a tired old electric coffee maker.

Hannibal wrinkles his nose, knowing Will can’t see it, and makes a sound of quiet consideration. “Do you have the paper filters and butcher’s twine?”

“Mmhm.” Will doesn’t bother asking why; just reaches into the cupboard and pulls down a roll of untreated string and plastic-wrapped paper discs. He sets two out on the counter.

Hannibal scoops a generous serving of the grounds into the center of each filter, then bundles the loose paper at the top and ties them off. Drops one into each mug. “Do you have a kettle?”

Will shakes his head. Before Hannibal can frown and ask him how, exactly, he planned to make tea, Will fills the glass carafe and dumps it into the electric coffee maker regardless, but leaves the filter case empty. He turns it on, then returns to Hannibal’s arms. Turns front-facing, and tucks his cheek against Hannibal’s shoulder. Then he tilts his head—blinks, and looks at Hannibal’s exposed skin in proper lighting. “Oh.”

Hannibal glances down—ah, yes. Will hasn’t seen his handiwork since he left it. “I think it’s healed nicely.”

Will is fascinated, wide-eyed as he stares at the red imprints of his own teeth scarred into Hannibal’s flesh. Slowly, carefully, he touches his soft lips to each shiny patch of skin.

He doesn’t apologize. Good. Hannibal doesn’t want him to.

Will stands there, nosing and nuzzling until the water has all been forced through the machine, warm in the carafe. Hannibal reaches around him to pour it into each mug. The makeshift tea bags full of coffee grounds float at the top, and Hannibal tugs on each string until they absorb water and submerge.

“Milk’s in the fridge, or half-and-half. There’s sugar in the cupboard,” Will says. He doesn’t let go, or give any indication that he might allow Hannibal to move.

Hannibal wonders if it’s simply their presence in Will’s own house that has regressed him to a very good impression of a multi-limbed invertebrate. Regardless, he pets his hand down Will’s back and feels every notch of bone beneath the worn, thin cotton; beneath flesh. “Noted.” Another minute longer; Hannibal touches his lips to Will’s temple, and, gently amused, strokes his hand over the

crown of Will's head, cups the nape of his neck. "Go get dressed, Will. If you're to be handling the firearm, I'd feel a bit better if you were more awake before we left."

Will mumbles something against his skin. Finally, he retreats. Blinks, and already looks more awake than he was before. "Alright. Will you make my coffee?"

"Yes," Hannibal replies with a faint, fond smile. He nudges Will away from himself, from the counter, and tells himself he doesn't immediately note the absence of heat. "Let the dog back in, darling."

"Oh *shit,* Winston," Will mutters, and hurries to the door. The burst of cold air is bracing; it's certainly a frigid morning, and will be until well after the sun rises. The old dog, for his part, doesn't seem very bothered; he shakes himself as he enters the kitchen, then stares up at Will expectantly as he sits before his bowl. Hannibal tries and fails at not smiling when he notices Will's guilty expression as he heaps an extra half-scoop into the metal dish.

It's not kibble—Hannibal can smell the scent of meat and egg and some sort of vegetable. He looks at Will curiously. "Is that homemade?"

"Yeah," Will replies as he puts the lid back on the pyrex container and puts it back into the fridge. "I never know what to do with organ meat, so I use it for dog food. 'S better than wasting it, and if I left it out, there'd be bears and coyotes all over the woods, and I've already got enough issues with both. But dogs are more than happy to eat the stuff that's a little past prime for people, and it's better than anything you can get in a bag at Walmart."

Hannibal's brows lift with intrigue. Will returns and sets the half-and-half on the counter; he left the milk in the fridge, Hannibal notices. That's just fine. A bit of richness from the dairy fat will temper the bitter edge of chain-brand coffee. "There's a great deal that can be done with organ meat, if you're in need of recipes."

Will's expression flickers with something unnameable, but settles on sheepish. He glances at Hannibal through tousled bangs, an affectionate and self-deprecating gleam in his eyes. "I just never learned how to harvest or prep it. My dad never liked it. I'm not quite as picky."

Possibility. Hannibal feels it bloom inside his belly, in a glimmer of intrigue and excitement that he bites back and hides beneath a smooth, even tone. "I could teach you, if you're amenable."

Will's eyes are bright. Even heavy-lidded and still lilac with sleep, they glimmer and gleam. "Waste not," Will murmurs.

Hannibal flashes his teeth, and fondly eyes Will as he retreats. "Exactly."

He changes while Will nurses his coffee in the kitchen. The things he packed in his bag had been stashed in the closet, so despite the fact that he's in no way self conscious, he changes in the bathroom. A thermal shirt, both moisture-wicking and skintight, to go underneath a neoprene weather-resistant coat; runner's pants to go underneath what should very well be categorized as the lower half of a sweatsuit, artificial enough to repel snow and ice, while also being breathable. Wool socks. Well-worn army-grade combat boots, flexible with a solid tread.

Hunting clothes—the kind he dons when he goes out with the keen intent to track down a target without the need for pomp and circumstance. No opulence necessary.

The kind of clothing he can run and move in. The kind of clothing that doesn't show blood.

Ultimately, it's nothing special but for its use outside the practical. But one wouldn't know it from the way Will's eyes widen and he sets down his mug of coffee, from the unsteady breath he draws.

And Will, too, has changed—thermal warming layers even more clinging than his own, which adhere to the curves of Will's legs and hips, his chest and shoulders. His hair is tied at the crown of his head in a tight but messy bun, bangs clipped back with criss-crossed pins. He wears no makeup, but is clean-shaven and bright-eyed, and.

Hannibal sees him without clothing often now, and yet, the physical aesthetique of Will's skin tight sportswear is one that especially highlights his fine figure, all lithe muscle tone and slender limbs. He looks like a young hunter; no longer a cub sheltered in the den, but a young adult ready to run.

His eyes widen when he sees Hannibal. His lips part on a soft, punched-out exhale. "Oh, that's just unfair."

Hannibal flashes his teeth in a sly, smug grin. He goes to the counter to pick up his mug and rinses it in the sink, drained to the dregs. He enjoys Will's eyes on him all the while, the hunger he feels radiating at his back. His instincts rebel against such a feeling, and yet, with Will, he knows that primal starvation is of another sort altogether.

"When would you like to head out?" Hannibal holds out his hand and Will places his mug into Hannibal's palm. He rinses that, too.

"Soon," Will replies. "I just need to gear up. There's snow on the ground, so I could get the game sled. I usually field-dress on site. It'll be easier with two of us. We're not going far, so I don't think I'll need the four-wheeler. We'll either find something or we won't."

"It helps that you're familiar with the territory," Hannibal replies. "I think we two should be more than enough." He turns the water off, and turns his attention to Will.

There's something there in his face. A distance in his eyes as he stares off into nothing. A set of his spine, a slight part between his lips that shows the points of his canines. A certain laxness as he rolls his head back and as his neck cracks, and he pushes himself up and away from the counter. A coiled, dangerous grace to the way he moves.

"Then I'll get the gun."

Call and response. His beloved is awake. Hungry. And so, Hannibal follows.

The gun safe is heavy, a gray-and-green thing with a massive dial combination that Will is already half-into by the time Hannibal places himself at his side. It clicks and screeches as Will pulls the door open to extract the rifle: wooden stock, stainless barrel, bolt action. Optic scope mounted to the top of the barrel. Will takes it and points the barrel toward the floor to check the chamber in a motion that's clearly force of habit. Empty. He slips the strap over his shoulder and reaches up onto the suspended shelf to drag down the box of ammunition—

A folder comes with it, and Will freezes.

Hannibal is immediately one-hundred-percent at attention.

Will snatches it down, clutches it close. His jaw is tense, eyes wide; his pulse rabbits in the side of his throat. There's a corner of a piece of paper that hangs out—heavy stock, slightly glossy. The backside of a large photograph. The type that are taken at crime scenes.

Hannibal stares at him. His mind whirs in silence. Processing, processing, running several trains of thought at once, as always; is it what he thinks it is? Will's reaction alone says *yes.* Which raises the question as to how he got it, when, and where. What does he have?

What does he know?

"I forgot I put it in there," Will whispers. His shoulders hunch and he glances down, though doesn't pull the folder away from his chest.

"A secure place to store belongings," Hannibal replies quietly. "Or information."

There is something defensive in the set of his posture, shoulders tensed around his ears. He looks like a dog expecting to be kicked. It doesn't suit him.

"What is it, Will?" He already knows.

And though he is tense, Will doesn't look afraid; there's no fear in his posture, in his scent. Will licks his lips. Sucks the lower one into his mouth, and releases it with a sigh. It's wet. Shiny. Pink and swollen.

He looks up and meets Hannibal's eyes. "It's the Ripper's case file."

"You promised me you'd keep me apprised of the progress of your investigation." Though Hannibal knew very well that Will was lying the moment the promise left his silver tongue. It's against his nature to confide when he believes his secrets to be protection. Hannibal had been willing to let him keep those secrets. But he didn't imagine Will would get very far without his knowledge, either.

"This isn't progress," Will counters. His brow creases with consternation. Agitation. "It's just…"

Will goes quiet. His hand spreads wide over the folder. Splayed, like a lover's touch, gentle as a caress, and suddenly Hannibal finds himself as still, as frozen as the clever thing beside him.

"Pictures," Will murmurs. "Of the scenes he's left."

Hannibal's curiosity burns at the base of his throat, hot in his belly like fine wine, like aged scotch. Like intrigue and desire. "How did you get them?"

Will's fingers tighten around the edges of the thin cardboard. His lashes lower. He opens his mouth and closes it again, and finally releases a harsh sigh. "Margot bribed a cop."

Hannibal's brows lift. "You brought Margot into it?"

Will scowls at him, the kind of look that clearly says without words that the person on the receiving end has no idea what they're talking about. It's so very *young,* that expression. "Like I could keep her out of it. I don't tell her hardly anything, but I complained about not being able to get any intel, and within a week she handed me a folder and told me to keep my mouth shut, so I have."

Hannibal exhales gently through his nose. At the very least, if the transaction went through Margot Verger, not only is she of a social position enough not to be touched, but such a thing would never

logically lead back to Will. So intelligent, his darling, and yet so naive. Such juvenile solutions to such large and complicated problems.

Will's expression is dark. He tears his eyes away, practically vibrating with frenetic energy. "I'm not stupid, Hannibal," Will bites out. His voice is full of vitriol; as he looks up, his gaze is full of fire. He wets his lips again. "I'm going to keep you safe."

It's an admirable goal, certainly. One that, if Hannibal were not the very person Will sought to protect him *from,* he's sure he would be touched by. As it stands he can only manage a sort of quiet frustration, equal and opposite to Will's.

Will is *smart.* He's insightful. So why can't he see—

"It doesn't matter," Will snaps, and steps back toward the safe. "Let's just go—"

Hannibal catches him by the shoulder. Stops him, and Will turns back.

"Show me," he says.

Will stares at him. His pupils fatten. "Why?"

"I want to see him as you see him." Hannibal's hand tightens on his shoulder, almost against his own will. He has no desire to hurt Will, and yet such desire to convince him. To *help* him, if he can, to see what Hannibal so desperately wants him to see. "You find beauty in what he does, do you not?"

Will opens his mouth. His eyes are so dark. For a moment, he simply bares his teeth before he whispers, "Yes."

Hello, my love.

"Then, however much of a monster he may be, he knows a side of you that I do not," Hannibal says. And in that instant, the thought that Will would reveal himself to the Ripper, but not to him—"I want to know you. All of you. And I want all that you have to give."

A silent inhale. An exhale. A handful of seconds, of breaths, that contain only the beating of their hearts.

Will turns away and puts the folder into the safe. He closes the door.

But before Hannibal can protest, before his anger and rejection can rise, Will is there, and his hand is fisted in the front of his shirt. He is small, slender—still growing, his beautiful thing, and still changing in ways that Hannibal knows he will learn as Will grows older: at his side, one way or another.

"Then don't rely on *him* to tell you," Will whispers. "Rely on me."

From up close, his eyes are the color of roiling seas and glacier pools combined. A color undefinable by nature, just like one they belong to. "Knowing him would help me know you, would it not?"

He expects snapping teeth, a temper flaring. Instead, he gets a cool rise of a brow, a shrewd tilt of Will's head. "Why? He clearly doesn't know me all that well, or he would have me already. But he doesn't. You do."

And, oh, *that* particular statement hits him between the eyes, in his belly—it's his own temper flaring, equally tempered by desire and possession. Whatever expression crosses his face brings a smile to Will's. He pushes up on his tiptoes and smiles against Hannibal's mouth, but doesn't kiss him. He's far too cruel, and enticing in that cruelty.

"I chase," Will murmurs. "Because I have to, and he's leaving paths for me to follow, but it's your bed I come home to, isn't it? It's not up to him where I go; it's up to me."

Hannibal's hands curl around Will's hips. His teeth ache within his mouth; his claim threatened by the very one he's claimed, and isn't that just something? In Will's flirtation with danger, he is making Hannibal his own worst enemy. If it were real, it would surely end in death.

"And what should happen if you change your mind?" Hannibal says, though it's not his own mind that says it. It is the monster staring through the veil, aching. Waiting on promises that aren't Hannibal's to know, and yet they snarl and shake his bones like the door of a cage that's loose on its hinges.

Will's eyes are bright. He tugs at the front of Hannibal's shirt like a master tugging on the leash of a dog, and it nearly makes him *bite* if Hannibal weren't so riveted. "Why do you assume I haven't, and that it wasn't in your favor?" Will tips his head back, flashes the brand of Hannibal's teeth to his starving eyes, and suddenly, Will's beatific smile is gone, replaced by fire and flame. "You know what I am and what I could be. You've seen the dark in me, and it hasn't scared you away. And I am *happy* with you, Hannibal. I love you. And if I could have a good life with you, a *real* life, why wouldn't I want that?"

What is this feeling? It surely can't be heartbreak, but his chest is fit to burst. Hannibal stares down at Will and tells himself that this is not a loss, or a failure. That, in the end, the results will be the same. That Will choosing Hannibal as a good man is a victory. It is everything he worked for.

And yet it feels like a rejection of his very nature. Of his most intrinsic self. Of the side of him that reached out to Will and offered him everything—freedom, understanding… companionship. "But you intend to chase him."

"Yes," Will says. His expression is impenetrable. Impassive. It reminds Hannibal so wholly of himself.

He licks his lips. Inhales silently through his nose. "And what will you do when you find him?"

Only that brings a small flicker of… something. Not sadness. Perhaps it's—"I'll have to decide that when I do."

Uncertainty. Even now.

It's a terrible thing, knowing that his own actions have brought them to this. Hannibal can only help but wonder how things would turn out if Will were to change his mind about which version of Hannibal he means to keep. What he might do to protect Hannibal from himself, unknowing.

Maybe he should tell Will the truth. But he's waited this long solely so Will could make the decision, the final call, and know that whatever choice he reached was his own.

Is *any* choice he reaches truly his own? "How do I know I can trust you?"

Will's eyes shutter. It's not unlike a door being closed in Hannibal's face, and the shut-out feels *rude,* even knowing that it is the natural reaction of *any* person facing what is thought to be open doubt from their beloved. "Trust isn't known. It's felt. You either trust me or you don't."

The words are cold. Will drops his eyes away, and his shoulders tense. He clutches the box of ammunition in a white-knuckled grip that relaxes by measures, but Will looks deeply unhappy as he stares down at it and holds it close, and does not respond to Hannibal's thumbs stroking the crests of his hip bones. Cradles it against his chest, though not nearly as naturally as he did with the folder of the Ripper's crime scene photos; a paltry alternative.

It's been so long since he *didn't* trust Will that even the suggestion feels like a betrayal of some sort. Seeing the flicker of hurt and disappointment on Will's face may very well wound him as deeply as it seems he's wounded his beloved—quite unintentionally.

But it's a question that must be asked, because Will has wound himself into the fabric of Hannibal's life, his social circle, his home. And if Hannibal can't trust him…

"But to answer your question, and to quiet your mind, Hannibal," Will says softly as he turns away, pulls out of his grip, and sidles past but does not shove, "you can trust me because I have your teeth in my neck for as long as I live, and the only way I could go back from that is to cut them out. I think it's pretty clear why I can't do that."

Will goes to the bed. He sits on the floor, at the very foot of the mattress, shrugs the rifle from his shoulder and places it across his lap. Even unloaded, Hannibal sees how Will looks up and judges his distance and the angle of the barrel to ensure that it is not pointed in his direction. Ever-thoughtful. Ever-loving, ever-loyal. It's another pang of something that is not quite guilt, but feels in some abstract manner that he's made a mistake, even if logic says being wary is only rational.

But there's nothing rational about this, is there?

And Will is right. If ever anyone else had *dared* to make a mark on him, Hannibal is certain he wouldn't stand for it. And because of the placement of the scar Hannibal has left him, there is not a surgeon alive that could remove that skin and not greatly risk killing or handicapping Will entirely in the process.

He swallows silently. The feeling churns within his stomach as he watches Will's hands move, strong and practiced and capable. "Quite clear."

"Then consider your question answered." He loads four bullets into the chamber and presses down firmly with his thumb while he slides the bolt closed—loaded, but without a round ready to fire. Will flips the safety on for good measure, and then he looks up. "Hannibal."

"Yes."

Will sighs gently through his nose. He places the gun down, and faces the barrel toward the door. There's a pull between his brows that is one part consternation and one part sadness, like he can read the truth of what Hannibal's feeling and blames himself as equally for it. After all the care Hannibal has taken to stoke his confidence, it is, in a way, almost painful to see him thrown off by his own rash actions. His own instincts, his own betrayal.

Will stands. He lingers at the end of the bed, lips parted. Whatever words he's been considering fail him, for he takes a breath and lets it out slowly, so slowly. When he looks up, the darkness lives in him. It prowls behind his eyes, all while whining quietly in the night for his favor, for his affection.

Will steps over the gun, the twisted blankets, the evidence of the coddled and cozy night together. He goes to Hannibal and lays both hands flat upon his chest, and when he meets no resistance, he touches his forehead to the crest of Hannibal's shoulder, and then lifts it. Places his mouth at that same spot and simply breathes.

Speaks. "I love you." Softly, "I'm not going to betray you. I could never do that." Breathes, and finally whispers, "Please trust me."

In reality, in any actuality, has there ever been any other option? If there is, Hannibal fails to see it, and he likes to think of himself as a man with enough foresight and objectivity to see any and *all* options, extrapolate probabilities to the very end, regardless of whether or not they end in his favor.

But, in the end, there is no other option but trusting Will Graham. His heart simply won't allow it. "… I do."

Will breathes in silence for a time. His shoulders relax when Hannibal touches them, and when he sighs, it's like a rushing river released from behind a dam, collapsing and washing away all in its path. Every doubt, every concern. All of it, gone in the wake of Hannibal's continued love and trust in him, and, really, how could Hannibal ever imagine Will could betray him? Truly? Is Will capable of such a thing?

No. His knowledge and experience tells him no, Will could never do that. Whatever darkness lives under his skin has only ever searched for its equal and mate, and it is incapable of condemning its beloved, even to save itself.

"Thank you." He nuzzles Hannibal's shoulder, his pounding throat; noses at the strong line of his jaw, touches his lips to the corner of Hannibal's mouth. Clutches fitfully at Hannibal's shirt and tugs, desperate and needing. Desperately wanting, his sweet and uncertain and ferocious thing. "Hunt with me," Will breathes. "Share it with me, and know that you're the only thing on my mind."

And after everything it's taken to get them here, how could Hannibal deny him?

He curls his hands beneath Will's jaw and tips his head up; kisses chastely at his lips until they fall open on a breath. A plea that Hannibal indulges with a brush of tongue and nothing more.

He revels in the blown-black of Will's eyes. He sees the creature staring back at him and speaks to it directly; to Will, the real Will, trapped inside the jail of his own body, his own sensibilities. The one he wrote an homage to with a boy who didn't deserve to look anything like Will Graham; the riddles he left that are still unanswered, even now. And at Will's whim, may go to their grave unfulfilled unless Hannibal shows him otherwise.

No. He has to believe Will is everything Hannibal believes he is, and given time and distance, he'll see the truth as plainly as Hannibal writ it.

Maybe he'll even see it tonight.

Hannibal nods. "It would be my pleasure, Will, and my honor. Go get your coat."

The morning is cold, but Hannibal is dressed warmly and moves easily. The tread of his boots grips the ice as he follows Will from the perimeter of his property into the woods. They've left a light on in the house behind them, and when Hannibal glances back to place their direction in relation to the constellations hanging heavy in the skies above, it looks like a safe haven, a respite, welcoming and bathed in gold.

There are strands of Will's hair that are loose around his face as he cuts through the brush with Hannibal at his heels. From the moment he stepped from his porch, he assumed the mantle of… something. It is not human, nor is it a creature—it moves, resplendent, light on its feet between the shadows of the forest and the glow of the moon.

The gun is slung over Will's narrow shoulders; it taps lightly in time with his footsteps, with Hannibal's heart. He wouldn't say that he's committed even half of his attention to this hunt. It's all for Will. All of it, in the glint of his eyes. In the strange tightening of his jaw, and the loosening of his limbs, the lax laziness of heavy lids and the flare of his nostrils as he takes in the scent of the woods, death and decay and the crispness of winter. The earth of pine. Dirt.

Each of them carry a plastic bag within the inner pockets of their coats. It is, Will says, for the innards of whatever beast they fell, if they should be so lucky, and the remnants of its field-dressed carcass. Hannibal can imagine more than one kind of beast falling to Will's bullet—not only the type there is a hunting season for. But for a hunter of his own caliber, there *is* no hunting season. There is only the open range, and whatever prey he dares to seek.

He would see Will emboldened to the same.

"Do you subscribe to any hunting traditions?" Hannibal asks.

Will pauses in his steps. Places his foot firmly, and looks over with a darkness to his eyes that may only be the night. But it may yet be the presence of his beloved there, shifting. Testing. "What, like superstitions?"

"Practices," he answers easily. They duck through trees, off the beaten path as they cut into the woods, away from the pedestrian trails cut, presumably, by Will himself and his dog, by his unknown neighbor. Here, they make their own trail, two bodies on hard-frozen snow, wading into the night. "Processes you follow out of habit."

Will thinks on that a moment. His feet crush the ice beneath them, and each step, though crunching, seems muted the further from civilization they get. He glances at Hannibal, a pull between his brows, not quite grasping his meaning. "I field-dress immediately, if that's what you mean. I use a knife, not a skinning tool."

Hannibal doesn't allow the promise of that thought to linger. "Not quite what I had in mind." Gently amused, he steps aside, into each of Will's footprints. His feet are larger, though his strides made shorter by emulating Will's gait. In the imprints left, they melt into one being. One set of footprints, depressed and shadowed by the greater area and greater weight of a larger creature—not stalking, but protecting.

He likes the thought of that. And he is uniquely equipped to protect Will in a way no one else ever could. He is confident in his ability to field any threat—though, out here, they are the threatening ones.

Hannibal stalks the footprints of his love, and yet it is Will who feels more like a predator tonight. Hannibal simply shadows *him* for the want of seeing what he'll do. It's all he's ever wanted since the

possibility occurred to him. Will, unhinged. Will, unleashed.

“In my culture,” Hannibal murmurs, “A hunter’s first kill is honored by consuming the heart of the beast, cut fresh from the chest. It’s said to imbibe the young one with the life force of the creature they’ve felled.” It’s not untrue. But such a practice is limited to the usual prey animals; deer, elk, rabbit upon occasion. Not to the ones Hannibal hunts, certainly. Though he likes to imagine he might take what remains of their life force. The feast itself is life.

At Will’s silence, he continues, determined not to be dissuaded. Will has shown the signs of bloodthirstiness. Hannibal need only coax those tendencies out into the light once more. “It’s a gruesome practice, true. And I know it’s not your first kill, darling, far from it. But it’s a tradition rooted in cultural significance. I meant something along those lines.”

The crunch and crush of their footfalls. Will’s breath in the gloom of a pre-dawn winter morning, mid-December, frigid to a fault. “No, nothing like that. Nothing outside the usual stuff. Pelts and horns and the occasional trophy.”

Hannibal keeps his words deliberately light when he replies, “A shame. Tradition gives meaning to everything we do.”

“I think anything can have meaning, if we want it to,” Will says.

Hannibal ruminates on those words. He’s not incorrect. And yet—

Will stops. A river has appeared at their left side, snaking low and pale through the trees, through the lofted banks crackling with ice. The water’s surface itself is still soft with rippling motion, a current cold and untouched.

He looks at it, for a time. At Will framed by it, a portrait in stunning shades of light and dark. Shade upon Will’s face, beneath his eyes, blended with his form to give him a lithe and haunting silhouette, willowy as a banshee in the mists. And for that same stretch of seconds, Hannibal absorbs the sound of water. He wonders if it would be loud enough to drown out the sound of a deathly scream, of life leaving a body, of blood hitting the earth. A stream so small; no, perhaps not. Not quite. A crescendo of background music, perhaps. A harmony yet to be created, the sound of the world moving on as one thing comes to an end—should, indeed, something come to an end tonight. And should something else begin.

Will turns. In the light of the moon, his eyes are bleached nearly white. Haunting. Ethereal. Both dead and so very, vibrantly alive. “It’s not my first hunt. But it’s *our* first hunt.”

Hannibal wants to remember this. Even now, he is excavating room to pour a foundation for a new wing of his mind palace. It’s dedicated solely to Will; to the way his expression shutters off but his gaze is cracking open, to the curl of his fingers and the arch of his throat and the imprint of Hannibal’s teeth on his neck beneath the starlight. Hannibal is starving for the sight of him. To capture every iota of this moment and preserve it. To keep it, like Will, forever. “Yes, it is.”

Will’s lashes catch the starlight. He glows. Opens his mouth, and… pauses. Attention diverted, Will turns toward a nearby tree on the bank of the stream. He descends, sliding down the short slope to the edge of the water. There are patches of bark missing from the tree, here; furrows on the ascending slope from a creature struggling not to slip back down.

Will looks back at him and shifts his balance; holds his hand out, palm down—staying their chatter, an indication for creeping quiet. Will calls to the creature inside himself, familiar in the promise of

ferocity, an equal in the heavy, graceful way he moves and adopts something very near to silence. He climbs up the bank, brushes by Hannibal with a heavy-lidded gaze and a finger to his lips to ask for quiet, a quirk of a smile as he turns his back, so teasing and yet so trusting as he stalks off into the dark.

What can Hannibal do but follow?

Will walks on light feet, on whispered steps. He embraces the quiet like a lifelong hunter, and Hannibal behind him in the imprint of his shadow. They fade into breath exhaled in cold streams between pursed lips, rather than allow the trails of vapor to coalesce; they follow tracks, scrapes, scat. Hunters in the wilds, knees bent and low as they melt into the forest brush—Will in camouflage, and Hannibal in all-black.

They should stand out against the snow, but in a night as dark as this, as far from any city or light source as they are, the black and the white is much the same as one another. They weave in and out of the obsidian pillars of tree trunks, glowing beams of moonlight. Every so often, Will crouches like a feral thing among the felled limbs of trees and reaches out, just shy of prints carved into ice, strips of missing bark and broken twigs where some prey had passed through. And then he stands, stalks away, leaving Hannibal to follow his steps. Will never looks back; he tips his ear to the air and listens, and moves like one predator leaving room at his side for another.

Hannibal wants to hunt with Will, yes, but there is a monster inside him that is much greater than the civility he shields himself within, and it wants to give chase. Wants to *hunt* him, take him, claim him, and all he has to give. And in that vein of thought, Hannibal keeps his eyes solely on Will and locks on to the sight of him, the shape and sound of him. He's stricken by the feeling expanding behind his ribs as he watches Will stop—tips his head back, face skyward, and inhales. Exhales clouds straight from his mouth and into the sky, weather patterns born from his breath. Bares his teeth to the early morn and picks the elastic from his hair, shakes free his curls like a lioness banishing flies drawn to the blood on her maw.

It's not practical, but it's visceral, and it impacts Hannibal deeply as he watches Will shed the outermost layer of his refined self. It feels like watching him strip bare. Will may normally prefer the still silence of a fishing lure, but Hannibal has seen him naked, heart and soul. He's a natural-born predator, one that kills to eat.

They're close, now. Hannibal knows it from the way Will's hand rests on the gunstock, casual as you please. Hannibal hardly pays the tracking any mind. He'll be the first to admit that he is much more interested in the hunter than the hunt. After all, deer are only deer. They don't know how to hide, how to evade. They just are, and they just run. But a patient hunter doesn't have to be fast until the final strike.

Hannibal's body tells him they have only gone a few miles into the woods before Will slows. The brush here is dense, heavy, and he can once again hear the sound of water in the distance. The stream must be nearby. But the strongest sense is the scent of decay—stale snow, old leaves. Underneath it all, probably too faint for anyone to detect anymore, is the smell of dead blood.

Things have died here recently. And judging by the way Will looks at a spot on the ground, and then up to a hanging bough, Hannibal doesn't have to wonder who caused that death or why.

Hannibal is drawn to him—he summons himself to Will's side and looks up with him at the branch above their heads; sees the place where a coil of rope tore the bark away when a great weight was hoisted. Will caught something here, killed it, and butchered it. Hannibal can smell the blood beneath the layer of ice, the ground frozen too solid for it to fully penetrate the layer of frigid topsoil.

Will looks at him. His eyes are bright, his pupils dark, and he is pale and disheveled and yet so very fine. There's some sort of manic pride that sits inside his gaze. That same pride blooms high on his cheeks, two bright spots of flush; on his chapped red lips.

Look, he says. *Look,* she says. *Look,* they say. *Look at what I can do.*

Hannibal looks at him and slowly smiles. *Show me.*

Will's hand closes around the stock of the gun, and he smiles back. Inclines his chin toward the sound of the river and slinks off, and in that moment, Hannibal wonders if this is what it is to be the prime of humanity, or if this is what it means to be something *more.*

They come to the crest of a slope that breaks off into a frozen bank, tumbling sharply downward where the water has eaten away at the land and created a clearing below. It's almost a pond; the kind of place in a river where it first started flowing and pooled and welled until it finally found the path of least resistance, and nature triumphed once more. As such, the water is frozen across the slow-moving surface, and only emerges to a running river where it continues careening down into the dark.

Will's shoulders relax. He lifts his head. He looks regal, untouchable, a shining and austere figure in the slips of the moonlight coming through dead trees as he looks down upon the animals at the water's edge. A group of does and fawns—most adult and fully grown, nearly blending into the brush. One young female has her head bent to drink; her ears are turned outward to listen for any sound. She's vulnerable, and none of the smaller fawns linger close to her, she's perhaps a yearling judging on size, but likely not at the three-year threshold.

Hannibal knows Will is an experienced hunter, but there is still some distant element of surprise when Will raises the rifle to his shoulder and gazes down the sights. It's pleasant, knowing that what sentimental concerns he imagined Will might raise have faded in the face of reality without hesitation. No thought spared to the age of the young doe or her sex. Only the stoic calm of a hunter with a target and the high ground.

One eye closed, Will takes aim at her chest and pulls back the bolt to load the chamber. The doe looks up—

—a split-second reassessment, Will opens both eyes, and lifts the barrel. Aims high. Takes the shot.

The fawns bleat with fear. The deer scatter into the brush. Will lowers the rifle and ejects the shell casing. He flips on the safety and slings it back over his shoulder, eyes huge and bright as he crouches atop the ridge.

Will takes a knife from a holster on his ankle; Hannibal wasn't even aware Will had it until he sees the silver gleam of the blade as Will flips it in his palm. Tips forward and puts his heels into the frozen dirt and rock and ice and slides down the sharp drop.

He stands at the bottom and turns. From the lower bank, he catches Hannibal's gaze in the dark and smiles, all teeth. Behind him, felled by his aim, the doe is prone on the bank, torso perfect and unmarred. Her skull, however, was split by the passing bullet. Beneath her ruined head, sinking into the snow, shines a dark reflective pool.

Will's knife flashes in his hand. He stares up at Hannibal, but not like a supplicant before a god—rather, one divine creature before another, expectantly awaiting his fellow to join in the revelry.

And the best is yet to come.

He holds out his hand: the other one, the empty one. He's too far down to reach, of course, but the purpose is clear. *Join me.* And though there is an easier path if he should go around, Hannibal, too, descends.

Will is demanding; takes Hannibal's hand and reels him in, steals a swift and stinging kiss from his lips and swallows the exhalation straight from his lungs. Will has been breathing the frigid air for so long that even his tongue is cold. So is the knife as Will searches for the edge of Hannibal's glove, peels it off, and presses it into his bare palm.

"You want to see me. Know me. So show me *you,"* Will murmurs against his mouth. "My hunt, your tradition. *Our* hunt, *our* tradition."

Hannibal's fingers tighten around the handle. It's a sturdy thing. Good quality. "It's not for the faint of heart," he replies, very nearly breathless at the thought of—

Will pulls back. Tilts his head, and with an unimpressed glance and a wry tilt of his lips, kneels before the doe. He pulls his own gloves off with his teeth and tucks them into his pocket, and then there is a flash of steel as Will pushes the deer's ruined head back to expose her throat and draws the narrow blade of a concealed pocket knife across it in a deep, forceful drag.

The doe is freshly dead, and though her heart has stopped beating, there is enough residual convulsion and hot blood has not yet congealed inside her. What lingered in her throat now spills across the ground, stains Will's hands a deep, rich red and fills the air with the scent of iron. Will's hair is wild in his face, around his shoulders, a beautiful and untamed thing.

He is the finest creature Hannibal has ever seen.

He looks up beneath his lashes. "Do I look like I'm faint of heart?"

"No," Hannibal replies, barely a breath, not even a whisper. "You don't."

Will nods once, firmly. "Show me."

It's been many years since he last butchered a deer. Not so long, of course, since his last hunt. But he remembers the technique, and the muscle memory is similar from one creature to the next, though there's a howling instinct that prowls inside him at the idea of cleaning his kill in the open. After so long being careful, any sort of public butchery now feels threatening, almost illicit. But if Will notices the silent, instinctual glances upward for encroaching predators, he doesn't mention them.

He rolls the doe onto her back and places the blade at her belly beneath the udder; slices shallow, just through her skin, not deeply enough to pierce the peritoneum. Splits her open to the chest and makes enough room to extract the innards within their sack, slick and hot against his hands. It's not so different from surgery, in a way, though in surgery slicing through that thin white membrane is not only necessary, but the goal. In the matter of the doe, Hannibal leaves that sack attached for the moment, though removed from the cavity. The membrane will protect the offal until he's ready to harvest.

Right now, he has a more pressing goal, up to his elbows in the chest cavity of the doe. There is only the smell of viscera and whole organs, but fortunately there is no sour or sweet tint to the meat—no sickness, no weakness. She is good stock that will feed them well, a plentiful bounty for them to share. Hannibal slices the diaphragm from inside the ribs until it comes free. It exposes flashes of the lungs, now immobile; the heart, still twitching.

Will shuffles at his side. When Hannibal meets his gaze, he might have thought to compare Will's trembling interest to a hunting dog's appetite, if not for the lack of anything remotely domesticated or controlled within his beloved. No—this is a wolf, and he is as captivated as he is starving. As beautiful as he is wild.

Hannibal finds the heart, far larger than a human's. It trembles in his palm with the electric aftershocks of the doe's sudden death, and he slips the knife in where it connects to the chest wall. *Schk, Schk*, and he slices through flesh and gristle. Quick and skillful cuts until it detaches, until Hannibal frees it from the connective tissue and trims the nerves and strings of fat away, until it is simply meat. Until it is so much more.

A heart shared. A heart offered. One that Hannibal considers as he weighs it in his hands, and their next steps. He has no compunction about consuming raw meat; this animal is healthy, and when fresh, the risk is as low as it could possibly be. However, this was not his kill—it's Will's. And though this experience is theirs to share, Will asked for this, and the first bite should belong to him.

Hannibal looks down at the heart, and then over at his beloved. He holds it out to Will, and sets it carefully in the cradle of his fingers. Will shakes. His pupils are blown, loose strands of hair stuck to his cheeks, his temples. Dripping down around his shoulders, as the blood drips over his white knuckles. He stares at the heart in silence. His mouth is open. Gleaming. Wet.

Red, as Will parts his jaws with a terrible sound that is both pained and exalted and tears into the meat. Inhales unsteadily, echoing the thunder of Hannibal's heart. His teeth close. His hands flex. Will *rips* his mouthful from the bulk of it with a muted tearing of flesh.

He chews. Pauses, and does not swallow as he turns and holds the heart out to Hannibal. Stares at him, *pierces* him, until Hannibal takes it back and puts the flesh to his own mouth. He doesn't hesitate. Blood bursts across his tongue, hot and cloying and distinctively tinged with the flavor of game, and Will doesn't start chewing again until Hannibal does.

A sacrament. This is holy ground, consecrated blood. Communion taken together, but the flesh is not of God. Felled by gods, perhaps; one older and experienced, and one so very young, but burning with potential.

They swallow.

Will's eyes are alight. There is gore smeared around his mouth. The very ends of his curls are tinged with red. He is a feral, unhinged thing, and he is nothing short of sublime.

Ruined heart clutched tight, Hannibal reaches for him. Will bends like a plant to the sun, catches Hannibal's hand in both of his own and lifts it; puts his cheek into his palm, regardless of the mess. He glows with pride, radiates pleasure, utterly triumphant.

One way or another, Hannibal knows that no matter what drew Will to get that folder and hold those photos so secret and dear, no matter what illusions Will harbors about the Ripper (about *him*), they will play out in the end. For beneath these veneers that shield them from public view, in their minds, in their hearts, they are just alike.

"How do you feel?" Hannibal asks.

Will licks his lips. Turns his face and kisses Hannibal's wrist. Leaves his eyes open, his pupils so huge that the rings of blue are indistinguishable. He shakes, but when Hannibal drops his hand to Will's

throat and touches the pads of his fingers to Will's pulse, it is steady, strong, and slow, though his face is branded with blood.

Will whispers, "Powerful."

3:9

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for helping this fic pass 20k hits!! Holy moly, y'all. I'm so excited because things are FINALLY picking up, and we are almost at the one-year mark of me writing this fic, and I am almost at the part that I've been most hype to write. Shit is coming TOGETHER, we are clipping right ALONG. \o/

(Buyer beware: NSFW ahead. It's all Amanda's fault.)

They take her back to the barn, guts bagged, carcass slung over Hannibal's broad shoulders. The ice breaks beneath their feet like every societal convention they have ever faced has shattered at the reality of tonight.

They hang her on hooks to butcher her body into pieces. Hannibal guides Will's hand with the knife, pressed flush against his back. They breathe together, they move together, hyper-aware of each stroke of the blade, each spark of heat between their bodies. They shear the pelt from the meat, slice the meat from the bone. Some is put in the rusted chest freezer, older than Will himself. Hannibal picks through the organ meat, removes the doe's liver and kidneys, a length of intestine. The rest he places within the other plastic bag to be frozen and made into next week's dog food. They carry the kept organs, the tenderloins, and the doe's femur back to the house. The meat is put into the fridge. The bone, Will gives to Winston on the kitchen floor. He can feel Hannibal's eyes on him in what remains of the night, the gray light of the rising sun through the single-pane window. Will closes the hall door behind them, a solid barricade keeping Winston in, and follows Hannibal into the bathroom.

They're silent. Hannibal's eyes are rapt, dark, as he pulls Will's shirt over his head and Will fumbles at his fly. They clutch and claw at one another, impatient and needing regardless of the dirt, the viscera that clings to their skin; Will pulls the elastic from his hair and throws it into the sink. He kicks away his pants, his underwear, his socks, and closes the distance between them as he clambers into the shower. It's tight quarters, cramped, but it doesn't matter, for from the moment Will is beneath the spray, Hannibal's hands are on him. Palms broad on his belly, fingers in his hair, pulling him back against Hannibal's chest as sharp teeth edge along his neck, the taste of blood still cloying in Will's mouth, and.

Will braces his hands on the shower wall. He arches and Hannibal covers him, engulfs him, sinks inside him as the blood sloughs off their skin. The shower spray is near-scalding as it pours over them; Will can barely hear the sound of their breaths. There is only the sound of the water in his ears and the pounding of his own heart.

It feels like suffocation, like drowning. It feels like he is not the only one inside his brain, and the version of Hannibal he has embodied tonight in the woods has followed Will home and back inside

his body. In a sense he did, and he fills Will up so fucking good that he can't help but split open, hot and wet in Hannibal's hands and ready to be consumed.

The friction is intense, just on the edge of pain, but Will urges him on; moans and reaches back and digs his fingernails into Hannibal's waist, paws at him desperately and inelegantly, keens and chokes on the water until Hannibal's fingers slip into his mouth and angle his head down and Will sucks them between his teeth, sucks them like he would suck Hannibal's cock if he could have it and not lose the sweet brutality of the way he's getting fucked.

The angle is perfect, and Will is building and expanding and burning on the inside, filled up with clenching desire and arousal and his body is so full of sensation that it's almost agonizing. His legs shake, and one of Hannibal's arms wraps around his chest and tugs at one nipple; holds him captive, holds him still as Will writhes against him and Hannibal shoves inside in sharp, jabbing thrusts, and Will is electric and vibrating out of his own skin with how badly he *needs* this, he *needs* it, *oh God fuck please harder—*

Hannibal slows. Pulls his hips back, and Will nearly bites his fingers hard enough to draw blood when the head of his cock catches his rim, stretched and sore and oh God he's so empty and he hates it. Whines and moans and wriggles, gasps and keens when Hannibal's cock slips between his slick thighs instead. When he pulls his hand free of Will's mouth.

Will sobs when those fingers slick with his own spit toy with his hole, push inside, curl in and forward until he finds that tender, swollen place that's already so abused, so *close.* Hannibal rubs at Will's prostate with his roughened fingertips, pruned and textured from how Will's been sucking him, gagged to stop himself from begging, but he has to beg now. It's so *much* like this, unyielding pleasure that doesn't drag out or push back in, but strokes and circles and Will *drips* at each push, twitches at each merciless tug at his nipples, pleasure and pain. Pleasure *in* pain.

Three fingers, but it's not enough. Will clenches around them, rolls his hips and tightens his legs and revels in Hannibal's quiet curse against his ear, and the head of his cock nestles in the smooth space behind Will's balls, almost as carefully cradled as he would be *inside*, *Hannibal, I* ***need—***

He doesn't listen. He touches all he wants, teeth bared against the side of Will's throat. He bites gently along Will's carotid like he's weighing the benefits of sinking his fangs into Will instead. Will wants to snap and snarl *fuck me or kill me but do something*, but he doesn't.

Will's thighs tremble. His hands shake so hard they slip, and Will braces his forearms on the wall instead. Surrenders, because that's what Hannibal wants. It's what Hannibal always fucking wants, and this time, Will is willing to bend.

Will moans, some long sweet sound that turns to a wounded whine. His breath shudders in his lungs. He wiggles and writhes, fruitless, on Hannibal's fingers, deprived of the weight and stretch and pleasure of him. Wordless cries; he feels so fucking empty, and his body is frizzling on the edge of a circuit break, and Will wants him inside, but he might come just like this—

The water shuts off. Will gasps, and doesn't realize his eyes had closed until he's blinking and blinded at the dim light of the bathroom, until Hannibal yet *again* takes away his pleasure and Will is left aching and raw, wordless with something indefinable that is both fury and insatiable, burning loss.

Hannibal holds Will at the waist. Lips against his ear, promising teeth; in a voice quiet and terrible, says, "Out. Go to your bed."

Will is so hard it *hurts.* "Hannibal," he breathes, a protest and a plea all in one.

“Go.”

Will stumbles out of the shower, legs shaking; his knees feels like jelly, and the triumphant power he felt earlier tonight is now flayed down to desire, exposed and unguarded, made desperate by the knife’s-edge of pleasure Hannibal has scraped along his spine. He *needs* , and he drips with water, with precome, mouth and eyes all wet with want, but he goes. He goes because Hannibal told him to, and though there is a fit of fury in Will’s belly that threatens to consume his arousal, he trusts himself to be vulnerable.

He trusts Hannibal to take care of him.

But two can play at the game of desire, and as Will crawls dripping wet into the nest of blankets, he knows Hannibal isn’t in any state of mind to second-guess whatever leeway Will gives. What Will wants now is depth of feeling. Closeness. Instinct. What Hannibal wants is Will at his mercy, and Will is all too happy to provide.

Will folds his knees beneath his body, spreads his legs, and lowers his chest to the bed in a display of willing submission. He shivers when he hears footsteps on the old floorboards; tucks his chin down and under and casts a glance back over his shoulder at the bright-eyed predator that prowls the halls of Will’s home.

His nostrils flare. Will whines, presses his face to the mattress. Arches his back. Shivers, clenches, just *knowing* Hannibal can see how much he wants, empty, aching—

Will yelps as he’s dragged back down the bed. He *wails* at the first hot, wet sweep of Hannibal’s tongue over his hole. His hands fist in the sheets, clutching, clawing at nothing. His hair drips into the blankets and his rim drips as Hannibal pushes his tongue inside, parts Will’s body to the demands of his snarling appetite.

There aren’t words for this feeling. It’s like his bones have liquefied, like he is nothing but the twitching, helpless throes of his muscles. Hannibal’s tongue feels nothing like his cock, slick and dexterous as he takes Will apart. He laps at place where Will’s body gapes open, kisses his hole gently, loving, then fucks his tongue inside. Will’s hips roll, but Hannibal’s palms are spread over the bones, holding him steady; where Will’s hands are in fabric, Hannibal’s fingers dig into flesh, and he pulls away only for long enough to punish Will with a stinging bite to the meat of his ass.

Will’s breath breaks from his lungs; his eyes sting and smart, the boiling liquid pleasure in his belly follows gravity’s path along the downward slope of Will’s body, dripping from his cock, welling in his eyes. Though he instinctively wants to push back for more, to curl in on himself and hide, he can do neither and the helplessness overwhelms him with how much he *needs.*

A wordless sound. A broken one that fractures as Will’s whole body shakes, as he writhes helplessly in Hannibal’s hands. His belly sinks in. Will can feel his cock leaking onto the bed, making a mess beneath his body.

And Will is a mess. He is impermanent, broken at Hannibal’s behest. This mewling, yowling creature that he’s become is surely nothing more than an animal, one tangled and trapped in Hannibal’s snare. Desperate, but not to be free—a trapped thing in heat, crying to be bred.

He needs *more.* Not much, but *something,* and if he doesn’t get it, he’s going to lose his fucking mind. “Please,” Will whines. “Please. Please.”

Hannibal takes his sweet time. Licks the stinging pink of Will's rim, so well-used, and Will shivers as he feels saliva dripping from his hole. "Please what?"

If he's smugly hoping for a cognizant answer, he's not going to get one. A slightly hysterical part of Will's brain knows this and barks out a laugh, desperate and shrill, but it sounds like a sob. Will claws at the bed. Rubs his cheek helplessly against the blankets, every inch of his skin sparking a live charge, begging to be grounded. *"Please."*

Hannibal hands flatten, smooth up Will's flanks, and scrapes blunt fingernails down his twitching sides. Will can't look at him; Will can't do *anything*, every piece of his body weighted and heavy and yet so alight with sensation. So he shudders with surprise when he feels Hannibal move; feels the mattress adjust as he spreads his legs, and Will widens the set of his knees in a silent plea.

The head of Hannibal's cock brushes Will's entrance, and Will gasps, moans at the sudden realization of how wet he is, how open—

One hand fists in Will's hair. Doesn't pull, but moves the sodden, dripping locks from his neck to bare the feast of his scarred throat to Hannibal's starving eyes. Will breathes through his mouth; his eyes water, he arches his back, he wants. And then Hannibal's palm flattens over the nape of his neck and *squeezes* , pins Will down as he sinks inside, one sharp, forceful thrust until he bottoms out.

Will sobs, whines, writhes. Wants, *needs.* "Fuck, *yes, fuck—"*

God, it's easy. So fucking easy, and the first few slow, slick grinds are punctuated by each of their helplessly aroused noises, savoring the dissonance of how different this feels from the last time. How soft and stretched Will feels, how smooth Hannibal's cock pushes in, the way Will's ass just opens right up. And Will likes a little edge of pain now and again, but this is something else; just the mental image of it makes his cock twitch, how red and shiny it must be, well-used, well-fucked. Held down, stretched out, mounted. Claimed.

A growl; Hannibal rolls his hips, rougher, rocking Will forward and pulling out fast, and Will's jaws part on a moan that's interrupted by the sound of skin meeting with force. Hannibal fucks him hard, pushes each sound out like he's deep enough to hit Will's diaphragm. One hand on Will's neck, the other grips his waist, tips him, angles him, pushes, pulls, until—

Will gasps as Hannibal shoves up against his prostate, swollen and tingling and suddenly not so very forgotten; he makes a sound that sounds like vicious victory and aims there again, again, again.

Will's ears rush with blood. His body buzzes, he can feel sweat and spit drip down the backs of his legs, feel his erection twitching and dripping onto the bed beneath him, and he's hot, overheated, and then Hannibal bends over him. Flattens his chest to Will's back and fucks in deep, grinds his cock in deep just like Will likes, and his chest hair scrapes against Will's firecracker skin as one arm loops around his chest. Hannibal molds them together, ruts into him like an animal.

His teeth touch Will's ear. "What we've shared makes you *mine,"* he snarls softly. "And I will not give you up to anything or *anyone."*

Will moans, a weak and thready sound that echoes with the clenching of his body, of his heart. He hopes it's true. *Needs* it to be true. Hannibal reaches beneath them, cradles Will's cock in his slick fist; when Will squirms, Hannibal bears him down into the bed. Kisses the scar of his teeth high on Will's throat and sucks a bruise to the surface within the ring of red.

Will's burning up, and he sobs at the heat, at the weight, the sting, the wet tightness of Hannibal's fingers around him. He's going to implode. Collapse. Condense, until like carbon under the force of this man, he becomes diamond.

Hannibal sets his teeth to the nape of Will's neck and whispers, "The other night, you ambushed me. Overwhelmed me. I want to return the favor, Will. I want to see you break. Come on, my love."

It starts in the depths of him, in his guts; each muscle tightens and trembles, and Will spills over Hannibal's fingers, clutches tight around the thick width of his cock, his spine curves, his lungs explode with sound. The moan that rips from him is nothing short of relief, of tension exploding and draining, and Will falling to pieces beneath it. Beneath Hannibal.

Hannibal tugs him back by the waist and grinds in; his hand is wet with Will's seed as he spills deep inside Will's body. His breath hitches and he moans from deep in his chest, vibrating against Will's back; his teeth flash and prickle against Will's nape, but he doesn't bite. Instead, as their bodies still and cool, he kisses the nub at the base of Will's neck, the vertebrae beneath pale, fragile flesh.

One thing is for sure—Will feels broken.

Will's not sure where exactly Hannibal finds the tissues, only that he's gone for a moment and returns, wipes the come from Will's side and the wetness from between his legs, patient indulgence as he removes the most soiled blankets from their comfortable nest. Then he slips his palms beneath Will's body and lowers him down to the bed. Turns him onto his side, and fills the gap at his back. Tucks their legs together. Murmurs to him softly, an affectionate tone that has no meaning; touches Will everywhere he can reach to soothe the tension and the soreness from his muscles. And, when Will's brain brings itself together just enough to be a puddle instead of vapor and he rolls onto his back, Hannibal acquiesces his gentle tug to lie on top of him, ground him from the floating feeling. His expression, now, is something attentive, not quite concerned—understanding, as Will had been understanding and present after breaking him open in turn.

And turnabout is fair play.

Hannibal brackets Will's head in with his forearms, noses at his temple, his cheek, and turns his head to give and accept Will's kisses when he's ready and of a mind to have them. He pets Will's hair, and it feels… so goddamn nice. Rubs one hand down Will's side, warming. Lies comfortably between Will's spread thighs and feels the aftershocks of orgasm in them, and Will basks in his warmth now that the sweat has cooled.

He reaches up. Slips one hand into Hannibal's hair and pets at the back of his head, at the nape of his neck. Tilts his head, bares his neck, and sighs when Hannibal tucks his face in the space there and nuzzles him with as much monstrous adoration and affection as Will knows he holds inside him.

Hannibal licks his lips, and Will feels the brush of his tongue against his throat. Feels it, and his pulse quickens when Hannibal murmurs, "I love you, Will."

They took a life tonight and shared it between them. They are, the both of them, predators underneath this love they share. Carnivores, ready to consume one another simply for the depth of their feeling, the insistence of their starvation.

Will opens his mouth. The words bubble in his throat—a confession he's held in check, clawing and howling to be let free, but.

“And I trust you deeply. Implicitly. You won’t scare me away. All I’ve seen of you has only made you more beautiful in my eyes. And as long as you come home to me, I won’t allow us to be separated.”

Will’s eyes burn. His body shakes. His breath trembles, and he wraps his arms around Hannibal’s neck, hitches his legs around Hannibal’s hips and crosses his ankles behind his thighs. Encircles him. Absorbs him, and all he has to give.

Why won’t he just confess? Does he really think Will would run from him after tonight? After everything?

“I know,” Will whispers, and it doesn’t mean what he wants it to mean, but when he feels Hannibal’s smile against his skin, it’s enough.

The campus library is something of a demilitarized zone in the lead-up to finals week. It’s a place where students camp during the extended hours, armed with their laptops and snacks and sometimes a change of clothing. Will is no stranger to taking up residence in close proximity to reference texts and easy-access printers; he has folders within folders of compiled research that he’s *somehow* managed to squeak out between meeting his *many* sources and splitting time with Hannibal.

It’s there that he’s set up shop by one of only several functional outlets that’s near a couch comfortable enough to sit in for some time. His laptop is open on a low table, books beside it, a water bottle near his feet beside one heel of his chunky leather boots. It feels like an attempted return to normalcy, but he doesn’t feel normal anymore.

Wilhelmina hasn’t stopped pacing inside him since this past weekend, and it’s driving Will to distraction. His nails and teeth ache; his mind races, full of ideas about flowers and poses and symbolism and tarot cards and decidedly *not* about anything that’s important to his degree. It’s feeling more and more like Will is attempting to shove himself into the shape of a person he hasn’t been since the semester began—an ill-fitting suit, and it’s pinching in all the wrong places.

He just has to finish this semester. Just another week or two, they’re so damn close to winter break, to Will having an entire month to himself to share with Hannibal. So close, so *close,* and this work is so absolutely mediocre that part of him wants to take a leave of absence. He’s so close to being done, just one more semester after this, but the impatience makes him nauseous, and he might not be able to stay anyway—

No. No, no thoughts like that. Will shoves them down and crushes them under the weight of his certainty that he is more resourceful than Abel Gideon, more sneaky than Jack Crawford, and he loves Hannibal Lecter enough to get away with murder.

Will inhales through his nose. Looks up at the shuffling of students and sees familiar faces and strangers both. Peter sits halfway across the library, head eclipsed by a pair of over-ear noise cancelling headphones, the only thing after his accident that allows him to concentrate. It’s something Will doesn’t usually manage; he’s too hypervigilant, needs to be aware of everything around him. It’s enough to drive him insane, to distraction, as he has gotten halfway through a presentation on viral social media that he can’t even concentrate on, despite it being his specialty, and—

A flash of red; Will glances up, but Freddie isn't paying him any mind. She scowls down at her cell phone, leaning back against the shelf of bound periodicals. Probably arguing with someone online, Will has to figure. His eyes linger on her, and after a moment, like any creature with a shred of self-preservation, her head lifts.

She meets his eyes. Sneers, and turns away.

Good. She's been bitter lately, sniping comments behind Will's back in class, blasting him in group discussions instead of paying attention to the readings or material. It's pathetic, really; annoying more than in any way significant. Freddie has become the least of Will's problems. An irritant, and especially in the absence of the Ripper's latest kills, she has nothing to criticize. Hell, she probably even thinks it's boring without him.

Well, she can get used to boredom. Will has no intention of sharing.

Will turns back to his presentation, and a paper open in his word processor. He's about twenty-five-hundred words into a five thousand word paper, has a twenty-minute keynote to finish, and two other finals about media that are hanging over his head like a guillotine of bad grades ready to drop if he doesn't get his shit together and study. Will sighs and reaches back, pulls his hair into a spider clip at the nape of his neck, bangs fruitlessly pushed back from his eyes, glasses on, and—

"Where?" Mutters an unfortunately familiar voice that immediately raises Will's hackles. "Yes, alright, thank you. Agent, over here."

What the hell is *he* doing *here?*

Will ducks his head and makes himself small on the couch—if they're looking for him, he doesn't want to make it easy, and he bristles further when the familiar form of Jack Crawford walks by him, flanking the twitchy man in a suit that's not half as nice and he doesn't pull off half as well as Hannibal. A pale and paltry imitation; but that's all Frederick Chilton has ever been.

Will holds his breath and stays very still and waits, because fuck, with this pair, they're surely here for him. He tries to figure out what the hell he's done wrong, what's given him away, and if—fuck, if *Hannibal—*

"Freddie Lounds?" Crawford asks as they turn into the stacks, and the mane of red curls bounces as Freddie's head snaps up. Will has barely a second to think *thank God* before he focuses any and all focus he had on their conversation, because if they're not here for Will, then this is gonna be good. "I wish we weren't meeting again so soon and under these circumstances. I'm gonna have to ask you to come with me."

Freddie's phone screen goes dark. Will gives her credit; she faces down two grown men with all the confidence of a house cat swatting at a cougar that wandered into its yard. "Agent Crawford," she says sweetly, all saccharine vitriol. "I'm afraid you have me at a disadvantage. I thought everything was settled."

"More document theft has come to light from the time of your visit to the hospital," Jack replies. "Specifically—"

"From my *private* office," Chilton butts in gracelessly, blustering.

Jack sighs. "Frederick, please. I'll handle this—"

“And *who* are you?” Freddie drawls.

“Oh, like you don’t know!”

“Uh, no. I don’t. Agent Crawford, there were a *lot* of people in that hospital. I would have thought the FBI had better things to do with their time—”

“Not a lot of people get arrested for data breach and presenting themselves under false pretenses. It seemed prudent to begin the investigation with you and work our way backwards.”

“So you admit discrimination?”

Jack Crawford says nothing. He stares at Freddie for a while, seeming to… process that statement, and exhales heavily through his nose. Either Freddie is incredibly bold or incredibly stupid. In this moment, Will isn’t sure which.

“No, Ms. Lounds. You’ve been convicted of a crime. We are investigating another crime that matches your MO, and would be a violation of your probation and your commuted sentence.”

Her eyes flash with something like fear. “Then it’s a good thing I haven’t done anything other than what we already, ah, discussed.”

Jack holds out a hand and stops Frederick’s protests in their tracks. “Then I guess you have nothing to worry about.” A rustle of paper; Will tries not to look up or crane his head, but Jack slips a piece of paper from his pocket. Holds it out to her. “I have a warrant here to search your personal effects. Another warrant is being executed on your off-campus apartment. Please hand over your bag and your phone.”

“Are you *serious?”*

“Quite. Quickly, please.”

A rustle. A huff. “What’s *he* here for?”

“To identify the stolen materials.”

“I didn’t *steal* anything—”

“Well,” Chilton cuts in, “someone stole my confidential medical notes, and I’ve been pointed firmly in your direction by a hospital associate. So I’ll believe it when I see it.”

Silence. And then, softly, with a voice like venom, “Really. By *whom,* exactly?”

“I’m, uh.” It’s clear Frederick didn’t expect to be put on the spot. “Not at liberty to say.”

“I have the right to face my accusers.”

“I’m your accuser.”

“Clearly not the only one—”

“People,” Crawford cuts in. “I will ask you to kindly shut up, or we can continue at the office. We’re in a library.”

Freddie blusters out a frustrated breath. Her voice, when it next comes, is an agitated whisper that Will barely catches. “I expect you followed up on what I told you the *last* time you showed up?”

Will bares his teeth. Of *course* it was Freddie that led Jack to his door.

“There was a thorough investigation. Unfortunately, your accusations did not pan out.”

“What?!”

“Ms. Lounds, don’t make me ask you again.”

“You’re telling me you came up with *nothing* on Will Graham? Agent, I’ve seriously gotta doubt your investigative capabilities.”

Will snaps his teeth. Glances down at his belongings spread out, and makes a decision. Fuck it. His homework can be done at home, and if he can sneak out before Freddie causes any trouble, he’ll be better off. He quietly sets about collecting his things and putting them into his bag, when—

“See?” Freddie snaps. “There’s nothing in there.”

Will crams his laptop into the satchel. Books follow. He picks up his water bottle and slips it into the side pocket.

“Agent—”

“Yes, I see it.”

Will swallows, curiosity piqued, but unwilling to risk his own cover. Crawford promised not to interfere or implicate Will, but Chilton, and *Freddie*—

“What the hell is that?” Freddie snaps.

“Is this what was taken?”

The sound of paper. A quiet, outraged noise. “Yes, these are my notes.”

“I don’t know where those *came* from! I don’t even *know* you!”

“We were informed by a concerned party about your vendetta with one of your classmates. When the identity of the notes’ subject came to light—”

A smack of skin; a crush of papers as Freddie must reach out and snag them from Chilton, and.

“Are you *kidding* me? Will *fucking* Graham? I’m gonna—”

Oh, God.

Freddie shoves by Chilton and storms over to Will. Her lip curls in a vicious, unattractive sneer as she takes in his collapsed workstation, notes in hand. “Going somewhere, Graham? I should have known.”

Wilhelmina flexes her claws and hisses with outrage when Freddie throws the papers in his face. It’s an insult more than anything else; Will’s glasses protect his eyes, but the notes tumble into his lap. He picks one up.

Will swallows hard. *Damn it, Hannibal.*

He realizes immediately what Hannibal must have done—planted the notes on Freddie and pointed the blame back to a person who is a reasonable suspect. It's a gift, in a way. Albeit one that is *massively* inconvenient solely due to the timing.

He really needs to learn to communicate.

But Will can play along.

"What the fuck, Freddie," Will snaps as Crawford and Chilton scramble behind to follow her. Will looks down at the paper. Freezes. Takes a breath, and his hands tighten around the edges. His eyes widen as he looks up. "What the hell is this?"

Freddie pauses, but only for a half-second. "Like you don't know."

Will looks down again. He already knows what it says. The words on the bottom burn behind his eyes anyway. *Gender expression a symptom of condition?*

Will blinks rapidly, as though absorbing this for the first time. His shoulders sink in, stricken. He pushes his lips together, but lets the lower one tremble as he looks up and his eyes slide past Freddie, to a truly horrified-looking Frederick Chilton.

Will inhales unsteadily. Oh the exhale, he whispers, "Fuck you." Stands. His hands shake as he picks up his bag and slings it over his shoulder. He looks at Jack Crawford, feigns the look of one who is deeply embarrassed. Jack's return expression is grim with sympathy and understanding.

Will holds out the paper to Chilton, and forces himself to become stone. "I think this is yours."

Chilton's frown is deep across his forehead, in his eyes. "Mr. Graham—"

"It's Will." Will squares his posture. Lifts his head. "Are you here to hand me a bill for your baseless diagnosis, or am I free to go?"

"Oh, I don't know," Freddie snaps. "Maybe it has some basis after all."

Against his will, his lip curls. Will bares his teeth, an animal wearing human skin. "Don't worry, Freddie, I'll let the professors know you'll be needing the notes for our lectures. The ones on slander and libel, right?"

Freddie's expression smooths into something cold, a cruel twist of a smile on her mouth. "Wow, look at that martyr complex."

Will ignores her. Ignores Chilton. Looks at Jack. "Can I go or not?"

"You're free to go, Graham," Jack agrees, nods once.

Will sidles by—and when he does, Freddie's hand snaps out to grab him by the arm. Hard. "I'm gonna make your life a living hell," she hisses softly between her teeth. "I know you did this to me."

Will pulls away from her, and Jack Crawford pulls her back with a loud, angry, "That's *enough."*

If she hopes to prove Will framed her, she won't find anything. And Will's sure that Hannibal, too, was as careful as he ever is. "Good luck with that," Will replies irritably. "I have homework." His eyes flicker up; meet with Crawford's, and dart away. Will turns his back. "Whatever. If you come up with a *legitimate* reason to arrest me, you know where to find me."

"Somehow, I think you're the least of my problems," Crawford mutters. "Lounds, Chilton, with me. Now."

They retreat in different directions. It's probably a good thing, because from the moment they're gone, Will can't stop smiling. He doesn't even try.

"You need to make the decision about how you're going to kill her before you do it," Will murmurs. "If you don't plan in advance, you'll make a mess of things."

Gideon's breathing is nearly silent. The car is on, parked off the side of a nowhere road, lights off. The moon is bright above. "You sound like you've done this before."

"Never. It's just common sense. People not thinking straight make mistakes. Mistakes get people caught." And it doesn't take much.

"How would you kill her?"

Will slides his eyes to Gideon. In that question, he hears a plea, and turns it back upon him like a knife. "This isn't about me. How do you *want* to kill her?"

Though he doesn't speak immediately, Will can tell he's not thinking about it. No, he's thinking about whether or not he wants to confess it. Will needs his trust. So even though he has to grit his teeth, he turns toward Gideon in the seat as he's done with Hannibal so many times. Settles in, bathed in starlight, and offers a placid, encouraging smile.

Gideon glances at him. Looks away. Opens his mouth. "Painfully," he says. "Slowly."

"Scalpel?" Will asks, barely breath. "Strangulation? Whatever you do is what I'll have to work with."

Gideon huffs through his nose. His fingers flex on the wheel, even though the car is parked. Diverts. "How do you *think* about this stuff?"

Think about it? Will smiles. Right now, he's only thinking about reaching over and snapping Abel's neck, cutting out his heart. He wonders if Hannibal would smile when Will presented it to him. He wonders if he'd have a recipe in mind. "To be fair, Abel, I'm not thinking about death the way you are. What I'm thinking about is the beauty I make from it after; a scene that can rival the Ripper's and send a message. But I need to know your design before I can properly execute mine."

"So you're asking me how I'm going to kill her so you can think about how to cut her up afterward." His lips press into a thin, grim line. He looks out the windshield into the trees.

Will stares at him. *Through* him. If Abel is wavering, this could be the first sign of doubt. And Will can't allow weakness.

“If you’re not sure about this, I need you to tell me now. All of this has been hypothetical; there’s still time to go home. Get a marriage counselor. I don’t care about that.” Will tilts his head. Softens his voice. Bites the inside of his cheek as he reaches out, gentle, and rests his fingers on Abel’s arm. Lies, “What I care about is that you’re happy with your decision. I don’t want to see you suffer—it’s the reason I brought up this possibility in the first place. But if you’re having second thoughts…”

Well, Will can make other arrangements. What he *can’t* do is stop the wheel of fortune from turning once its spinning has begun.

Gideon huffs. Shakes his head. His lip twitches toward a snarl, but his shoulders relax as he finally bends, looks over at Will. “I’m not having second thoughts. But the idea of not having freedom with what I do doesn’t entirely sit right with me.”

Will smiles. It’s less kind than the one before. “Creative freedom is the price of your personal freedom. You’ll have the emotional release of knowing you were the one to end her life. What I do after, everything that matters about her will already be gone.”

Gideon takes a breath, a steadying one. His eyes lower, lost in thought. “Anna hates blood. I always thought I’d slit her throat. Make her watch.” A heartbeat of silence. “Will that work?”

“That’s good. Visceral,” Will says. Pedestrian. Boring. “I can work with that.”

“You said you’ll be at the Johns Hopkins benefit?”

Will smiles. This one is real. “Yes, I’ll be there—I can run interference or back you up. Whatever you need.”

“And what do you need from me?”

It’s a prudent question. A smart one. It’s a shame that Gideon is so caught up on the outlines of his standardized, cookie-cutter life. In another world, with a little more freedom, perhaps he could have been an artist. Not one of Hannibal’s caliber, but an artist nonetheless. “Only what we’ve discussed. Your best behavior. A happy couple, a successful marriage. You’re selling your reputation.”

“What about Verger?”

At that, Will bares his teeth. Gideon stares at him, but he’s not cowed by Will’s vicious nature anymore—no, now he’s emboldened by it. Encouraged. He looks at Will and sees an equal. And though they are far from equals, Will lets him believe it. “Mason has no shortage of enemies. I’ll be able to get what I need to implicate him. And it’s never very hard to instigate him, either.”

Gideon’s eyes darken. “Instigate?” he asks carefully.

“Mason interacted badly with Annalise at the gala. If we can replicate that interaction, and with witnesses—”

“It gives him a motive.” Gideon sits forward, intrigued. “Good. This is good.”

Will tries not to be insulted. He answers with a wry smile. “Yeah, I did give it *some* thought.”

“Jesus, kid.” Gideon’s eyes shine, a cold, icy hue. He slowly leans back against the driver’s seat. His gaze doesn’t flicker from Will. “I don’t think I’m remiss in saying it’s a damn good thing you decided you like Hannibal enough to keep him. God help the Ripper when you get done with him.”

Will shows his teeth. He purrs. “The Ripper doesn’t answer to God, Abel,” he says. “But he’ll answer to me.”

The couch is gone from the living room. It was replaced by the bed frame, which now takes up more or less the same amount of space as the pulled-out sleeper sofa, but Will’s back is much gladder for it. He’s spread there now, the fire crackling in the hearth, Winston sprawled at the end of the bed, back leg twitching in sleep. Around him are open books that Will doesn’t read.

Instead, he’s sprawled on his back, staring at the ceiling, with the Ripper’s crime scene photos held to his chest.

A slit throat. So inelegant, and yet so… standard. It’s a stained canvas, not a blank one as Will would like, but he’ll simply have to do his best.

It has to be a message worthy of Hannibal’s artistry, a tableau that inspires horror and beauty. Craftsmanship that could pass as the Ripper’s: not just some pale imitation. It has to be perfect. It has to have meaning. It has to be something Hannibal will see and understand when the news reaches him, as it undoubtedly is going to before Will can make it to his side.

Annalise Gideon will only be his first stop of the night, after all.

And Will must… transform her. Elevate her. A sculpture created. A human life made into art.

For all that he’s studied the Ripper’s many kills, Will feels woefully unprepared. If it were simply a matter of sentiment, Will knows that anything he created would be seen, beheld, appreciated for the cultivated inspiration that it is. But this has to be more than an homage.

It has to be perfect.

He sits up. His neck still aches, the suck bruise Hannibal left now faded to yellow between the reddened scars from his teeth. Will threads his fingers into the hair at his temple, touches the bite tentatively with the pad of his thumb. He savors the deep sensation of it just below his hairline, behind his ear; it radiates feeling both into Will’s brain and into his spine.

Damn it. He wishes he could just ask Hannibal, but that would, of course, defeat the entire purpose.

Will huffs. Looks down. Sets aside the photos of Hannibal’s early kills as irrelevant. He has to stick with the theme, and tarot is an easy thing when each card has symbolism and meaning. He’s studied the cards extensively ever since The Hanged Man’s body drop. He likes to think he’s approaching something akin to literacy, but of course, Hannibal is always two steps ahead of anyone and everything.

Except us, Wilhelmina murmurs. Her voice in his mind is quiet, lower than he remembers. For every way that Will has become more like her, she is starting to become more like him.

But she’s right.

The Ten of Pentacles. The Ace of Wands. The Hanged Man.

Will looks at the photos, the most recent first; they're freshest in his mind. They're the most ripe with meaning, the most fraught with emotion once Hannibal knew Will down to his bones. In love, offering bounty, plenty. Affection. Freedom.

Potential. An olive branch, literally. Admiration and respect.

And—

Will is stricken as he looks at the photos of The Hanged Man. Somehow, seeing it again makes his heart race just as it did on that day. The fear and awe. The understanding. He'd forgotten the full scope of what Hannibal had done, always instead picturing the Rider-Waite card in his mind for all its symmetry, but.

The Hanged Man is a card symbolizing one stuck in life; whether intentionally or unintentionally, Hannibal saw Will stalled at the crossroads and offered him a way forward. The first contact between them. An invitation to welcome change, for Will to reassess himself and get right with the world. To land on his feet, and meet Hannibal as an equal.

But beneath that, the skeletal face of the card Death, so often misunderstood. Not death in the literal sense, but in the metaphorical. The unexpected death of their old lives. The end of an era, making way for new birth, for change. Sudden and violent, though only in the sense that neither of them could resist it or stop it, even if they'd wanted to.

He sets the photo in his lap. Presses on the bruise, and closes his eyes with a sigh.

What comes after death? Wilhelmina whispers.

Will's eyes snap open. His lips part. "Oh."

He'd thought it was consumption. The natural progression in the life cycle of predators—kill and eat. But Death isn't always killing. Sometimes Death is just a transformation to something greater.

*It's what he **wants.***

Will scrambles for the deck guide hidden beneath a book of plants; knocks it out of the way, off the bed, and Winston jolts at the sudden crash. Will reaches out to pet him frantically, soothe him as he pushes the cover back, flips one-handed through the introduction and foreword, through the Major Arcana—The Wheel of Fortune, Justice, The Hanged Man, Death—

"Temperance," Will breathes.

One foot on the shore, one foot in the waves. A solid foundation versus unpredictable upheaval. The middle path, an open perspective. Moderation, careful judgement, and not acting too quickly. A grounded approach that leads to convergence. Peace.

"You tried to tell me," he whispers aloud, and rubs a hand over his face. "I wasn't listening."

You didn't want to see it, she murmurs, relaxed in a way he isn't. Fondly amused. *But you saw it anyway.*

"I see it *now."* Will swallows hard. Exhales unsteadily. "This is it."

How he wishes he could reach back through time and space, take the place of Wilhelmina in that dream and her courtly appearance, her regal countenance, and have mercy on himself in a way she did

not.

But if she had, would he have ended up here?

What comes after death? he'd whisper, and as his younger, softer echo bled beneath that overpass and shook and said he didn't know, Will would smile and tell himself, *Everything.*

3:10

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the slightly late update. This week was a bit wild for me, but I hope to have another for you next week for the Headlines-versary on March 29th!! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

<< It's occurred to me that we need to pick out what we're wearing for the hospital benefit. There's a boutique in DC that I think would suit our needs. Perhaps I can pick you up after class and we could make an evening of it.

>> We're cutting it a little close, don't you think?

<< Not at all. Alterations can be rushed if necessary.

>> If you insist. I'm done at 4:45. I can meet you outside Knight Hall?

<< I'll look forward to seeing you then.

>> Sweet talker. Uhhhhh I wasn't really expecting to go out, so I'm not exactly dressed for dinner.

<< Don't worry, darling, if you don't have something suitable when you arrive, I'll be sure you do by the time we're done.

>> You're a horrible menace who needs to be stopped.

<< You agreed, Will. No fuss.

>> Fiiiiiiiiiine. Alright, gotta go to lecture.

<< Study hard.

>> Don't tell me what to do.

>> :P ♥

Will climbs into the Bentley pink-cheeked and bright-eyed, leaning over the center console of the car to steal a kiss before Hannibal can even greet him properly. It's been only a handful of days since their

shared hunt, but between Will's pursuit of his studies and Hannibal's varied shifts, they've had precious little time to talk, let alone see one another. Hannibal's lips part to accept Will's eager affection, and he keenly feels the loss when Will pulls away and settles into the seat at his side.

Hannibal sees what Will meant about not being dressed for dinner—though he's wrapped in Hannibal's gray coat, the collar parts to the bunched neck of his faded red-and-gold Maryland hoodie; beneath it is a pair of straight legged jeans, and his worn, heeled black leather boots. It's an outfit worn for comfort rather than function, hair pulled back into a messy bun at the nape of his neck, his makeup pretty but minimal; eyeliner and mascara, and a sheer, peach-scented chapstick, mixed with the faded scent of vanilla hand lotion.

Will notices his attention and picks self-consciously at the drawstrings of his sweatshirt, one of which pokes through the lapels of the vee-shaped collar. "I planned on being in the media labs until late. I've only got a henley on underneath."

Hannibal bites back a frown. "I'm not worried, darling—or rather, not about your clothing. Do you need to spend tonight studying?"

"I'd rather see you," Will replies. He flashes a grin when he sees the crinkle of consternation on Hannibal's forehead. "Don't grow a conscience on me now. You've been helping me slack off all semester. Plus, something tells me that if we don't get this done now, you'll be paying more for the tailor than you will for your suit."

Hannibal huffs through his nose and pulls out into the flow of traffic. Will's certainly not wrong. "I have a good relationship with my tailor. Her work is worth the cost, though perhaps not worth the lecture for my timing."

"I always tell Margot that she's gonna wait too late to choose at some point. But honestly, money like hers could get someone to alter her dress in the powder room, if she wanted."

Hannibal hums, amused. "How fortunate, then, that she has the good judgement to make her choices beforehand."

Will huffs and rolls his eyes. He bends at the waist to root through his bag, illuminated by the early sunset in muted, warm colors. No matter what Will wears, he's always perfectly beautiful. "I've been trying to make her a mindful, decent person since we met. You'll undo all my hard work if you put ideas in her head. Artists prefer having time to do their work." He shoots Hannibal a wry, sidelong look. "When is this thing, anyway?"

"This Saturday evening."

Will stills; turns and shoots Hannibal a flat, cross glance that he finds as humorous as it is attractive. *"Hannibal."*

"Darling, Eva has fully outfitted a suit for me in two days. Four is plenty."

"And when are you going to cram a fitting in?"

Hannibal smiles to himself. Will worries so much for the benefit of others. Perhaps he would benefit from worrying more for himself—if only Hannibal could manage to teach him to be a little more self-centered. "I'll have whatever we choose sent to her directly. She has my measurements."

“And what if I needed alterations?” Will scowls, but even the casual suggestion that Hannibal would, of course, pick up the cost of having Will’s evening wear properly fitted is in and of itself a victory. A casual step forward that Will doesn’t even seem to realize.

Hannibal hums, fond and amused. “She has your measurements as well.”

Will stares. “When did you get *my* measurements?”

“I gave her your clothes to be cleaned after the Beltway debacle.” The rest of the outfit aside from the jacket was a loss, but Hannibal didn’t imagine Will would miss them, anyway. “She’d been prepared to alter something for you for the Symphony Gala. It’s fortunate that you and Miss Verger are such a similar size.”

Will relaxes, seemingly appeased. He looks out the window as they pull of campus, onto the highway. “For the moment.” Hannibal glances at him, considering; Will waves his hand indistinctly, dismissing the matter. “You said you have a place in mind?”

The boutique caters to both menswear and women’s evening gowns; the selection, of course, is primarily for Will’s benefit. Hannibal will more than likely match whatever Will chooses to one of his existing tuxedos, or have a new one fabricated from one of the many bolts of fabric he’s purchased and set aside. “Yes, I’ve noticed it near the restaurant we’ll visit later this evening. It’s new to the area, but the selection seems to be an interesting blend of, shall we say, modest and modern.”

Will grins at that. “So they do classy and sexy.”

So succinct, his Will. Hannibal smiles slightly. Will’s humor is infectious. “Yes.”

Will leans back against the seat and turns his attention fully to Hannibal. He casts the same smug, confident glance while wearing his University hoodie that he wore in a little black dress fine enough to bring Hannibal to his knees. With their intimacy established, their interactions become so much less about attire, and so much more about one another. Hannibal without measure prefers Will comfortable and unashamed to put-together and discomfited, as he was when they met. But it seems that Will is settling into this life Hannibal wants for him, and is more often at ease in anything he wears. Comfortable, always, simply with who he is. “What would you classify my Gala dress as?”

“Elegant, and tastefully contemporary.”

“So classy *and* sexy. Good to know.”

“And if you chose to wear a suit, I would enjoy you just the same.” It’s true; the mental image of Will cutting a fine figure in a pantsuit, whether feminine of masculine, is an attractive one. Long, lean lines. Deep colors; patterns rich with texture. Whether outlined and filled in with pigment, or rough-jawed and drawling-tongued, Hannibal is enticed. Hopes to see both, come opportunity and time.

“I know,” Will replies, and for the first time, Will sounds as though he believes in that assertion. Pleased. “Maybe at some point. But I don’t get that many chances to get all pretty for you.” Will glances beneath his lashes, before that expression mellows into something more wistful, dreamy. “And I like the way it feels to dance wearing a skirt. There’s this… inertia to it. It feels ethereal. Powerful.”

Hannibal makes a quiet sound of intrigue. “Powerful,” he muses. “And you like feeling that way.” It’s not a question.

“I never felt powerful before you,” Will murmurs in return. He looks out the windshield, not hiding, nor turning away. Distant, yet present. Thoughtful in his absence. “Not really. Not in the way I know it now.”

“You equate your power with the elaborate nature of your ritual. Femininity gives you a solid structure to follow.” Hannibal considers this, tastes the truth of it on his tongue like peaches and vanilla. “I wonder, if you found a masculine routine quite so extensive, if it would give you the same sense of confidence.”

Will raises and drops one shoulder; not dismissive, but not so raptly fascinated, either. “Maybe. I also just… enjoy beauty. I know it’s not supposed to be for me. It makes me want it more, and I think I appreciate it more because of that. It’s the ritual, yeah, but it’s the end result, too.”

“The sacred and forbidden feminine.”

Will glances at him. He wears no expression at all. “I like forbidden things. I like fighting to keep them.”

Hannibal exhales gently through his nose. His Will, still so convinced of the crucible he must endure to keep the beloved he perceives to be a good man. How much simpler would it be if Will could just understand that Hannibal is fighting just as strongly in return for *him,* and that their only enemies are themselves?

He’s trying. Truly, he is, and is not sure what else he can leave that seems more obvious than what he’s left.

Soon. Another clue, seen and beheld. Soon.

Hannibal reaches over. Rests his hand on Will’s thigh. Let him believe these to be the dedicated words of a good and stubborn man—and let him someday see it for the truth it is. “We have that in common.”

If not for the fact that Will seems so relentlessly dismissive of the shopkeeper’s sidelong looks—for clearly he’s noticed, but casts Hannibal a glance and a smirk that’s solely amused and not at all nervous—Hannibal would be sure to add the woman’s business card to his rolodex. He may yet still.

But he’s distracted in part by the touch of Will’s hand to silk and satin, the attentive tilt of his head as he takes in colors and cuts. Hannibal wonders if this is a side of Will that Margot saw before the Symphony Gala, or if this is something different; if, perhaps, Will behaved more as he was then, with discomfort and protest to the idea that he should deserve such fine things.

Will catches Hannibal’s eye, tendrils of his bangs falling into his face, wild little curls that highlight his high cheekbones. He flushes, lovely and pink when he catches Hannibal watching, but he doesn’t turn away. Doesn’t hide, or duck his head, or look anything other than perfectly pleased to be the full focus of Hannibal’s attention.

The boutique feels vintage by nature—dark wood floors, high ceilings, shelving built into the walls for garments of every color; one side of the room is dedicated to suits, high-class casual closest to the

door, the back of the shop for evening wear. The other side is similar, from ladies' skirts and dresses to formal wear and gowns for black-tie affairs. Halfway down, in view of both the front entrance and the changing rooms, is the wooden counter and the narrow-eyed attendant. She seems too young to be the owner. Perhaps a manager. Lean, petite; she would make for something tender, Hannibal is sure. Flavorful, under the right circumstances—

"Aren't you going to look at suits?" Will murmurs. He holds something purple in his hands, a shade just too rich to be indigo. It contrasts nicely against the paleness of his skin, and though Will seems intrigued, he does not come across as particularly enthralled. Not that one, then.

"I have no desire to limit your selection," Hannibal replies easily. One palm finds Will's lower spine through the thick layers of his clothing; stands at his side, and, too, rifles through the samples, each of which with designer tags. No prices. "When you find something you like, I'll choose something to match."

"You have more opinions about fashion and style than I do." Will smiles to himself. "Maybe you should pick first."

"If you hope to divert my attention, I'm afraid you're out of luck."

That smile grows. Will deliberately doesn't look at him, but his tone is flirtatious when he replies, "Who, me?"

"If looking at gowns is proving not to be fruitful, we can always try another shop."

At that, Will does turn his attention to Hannibal; lips pursed with badly-veiled humor, eyes bright. "Alright, I'll make you a deal. Since you won't even pretend to look at tuxes, why don't *you* go find something to buy that you know will piss me off, and *I'll* stay here and find a dress."

It's clearly a ploy, but temptation is a terrible thing. Hannibal raises a brow; cocks his head in consideration. "Anything I want?"

"Anything you can find in this store. Sure, why not." Hannibal wonders whether Will would live to regret that broad sweep if Hannibal were to simply buy out everything the boutique has in stock, but he'll opt not to push his luck. Yet. "Under the condition that you don't interrupt me 'til I find you, or until we have to leave for our reservation. Whatever comes first."

"That gives you an hour."

"That gives *you* until I'm done." Will raises a brow. Smiles. "Deal?"

He looks so pleased with himself that Hannibal can't resist. He slips one hand into Will's hair, beneath the elastic that binds it, and curls around the nape of Will's neck. Draws him in. Licks at the seam of Will's mouth and tastes the slick, mild sweetness of his chapstick until his lips part on a bitten-back moan, opens himself to the press of Hannibal's tongue. He nips Hannibal's upper lip in recompense, a bright spark of exquisite pain, and Hannibal's chest rumbles with quiet pleasure.

"Choose well," Hannibal murmurs, and with one final kiss, leaves Will to his perusal of the wares. There are a few things he took note of when they entered that he's keen to collect now that he's given free reign.

Ten minutes finds Will still at the rack, a pinched, resigned expression around his eyes at the many pieces Hannibal has slung over his arm. Twenty, at least, finds him in absentia—presumably to try

something on that Hannibal did not see him retreat with. Thirty finds him *back* at the rack, looking less pleased than he did before. Hannibal is tempted to approach him, but must abide by the terms of their deal. And in the meantime, he is amassing a small but diverse wardrobe that will, with any luck, replace a number of the hand-me-downs from Miss Verger; and, over the course of time, expand.

At forty minutes, there is a tug on his sleeve. He didn't hear Will approach, but gives him his full attention and takes in Will's lowered eyes, and that his coat and sweatshirt have been stripped away to his henley. He looks ruffled; almost unbearably pleased.

"I found one," Will murmurs, and rests his hand in the crook of Hannibal's arm. Looks up. "Will you help me zip it up?"

"Of course." Hannibal tilts his head; watches as Will's eyes fall and settle on the garments slung over his other arm with a long-suffering expression. Amused, Hannibal says, "You gave me free reign, darling. You can't take it back now."

"Yeah, yeah," Will murmurs with a gentle roll of his eyes—that transforms into a flaring of his nostrils when Hannibal leads him toward the counter and rests his selections atop the counter, right beside the first group. The shopkeeper looks some combination of baffled and delighted; Hannibal wonders offhand if they're paid on commission. For her attitude when they arrived, part of him hopes not, but he'll just as gladly take advantage of her deference now if that's the case. And, indeed, she doesn't balk when Hannibal follows Will toward the changing room, though Hannibal feels her eyes on them as they leave.

The closer they get, the more Will shifts. His chin lifts. His paces are measured and sure, and his hand slips into Hannibal's. It's the same prowling creature coming out to play that ran at his side for the hunt, and Hannibal delights at its presence. It means good things—something has sparked Will's confidence.

"I didn't find anything on the floor that I liked," Will says. "But then I saw the return rack."

He's all but vibrating, bright with excitement, now. Whatever has captured his attention must really be something, and Hannibal smiles when Will looks back at him, sharp and intrigued. "Whatever it is, it has you in good spirits."

Will nods. He blazes like a small star, but halts Hannibal just outside the changing room door. Hannibal raises a brow, and Will laughs out a breath. "Just wait a second until I get into it."

"Dramatic reveal?"

Will snorts. "We both know you're the more dramatic of the two of us. Gimme a second." Without giving Hannibal time to formulate a retort, or even puzzle out what set of circumstances gave him the notion, Will slips into the changing area and clicks the door closed behind him. Hannibal can hear the rustle of fabric as he disrobes, the sound of breath. "You know, I imagined you'd get, like, one thing. Maybe two. I should have known better."

"I don't know why you expected differently," Hannibal replies, smiling though Will can't see it. "I enjoy spoiling you."

"How silly of me to think you'd respect the potential of my wrath more than your own curiosity," Will replies drolly. He sounds in good humor about the matter regardless.

"My curiosity?"

“It wasn’t about buying me anything in particular. You just wanted to see what I’d do.”

It’s an insightful observation—one that Hannibal can’t deny. “Perhaps.” He can hear the sound of Will taking something off a hanger, the dull sweep of fabric as it hits the floor. Beneath the door, a flash of shocking, scarlet red. Hannibal’s mouth goes dry, parched with desire for a visual taste of Will in a color more vibrant than blood. He clears his throat, his mind clear of all else. He keeps his eyes on Will feet and the swish of what may be chiffon, or perhaps silk georgette.

Suddenly he is ravenous, and though he had meant to remind Will of their upcoming time together over his school break and the necessity for a wardrobe at Hannibal’s home, the urge fades in the wake of this. There will be time for that later. Now, he is focused wholly and *solely* on Will—

The click of a door handle.

Hannibal is silent.

Will has pulled his hair from its bun, swept forward over one shoulder. It appears at first that his back is bare—but, no, it is simply the sheer paneling and the near invisible zipper that goes from lower back to the base of his neck. It hangs open, exposing every shift of his shoulders, every vertebrae beneath flesh.

There are no bruises today. There are no scrapes from a brick wall, no cuts, no soft and wounded voice begging Hannibal to document the violence done to him, and yet, this moment is as clear in Hannibal’s mind as the sketch in his notebook at home. One moment stretched throughout the fabric of forever—Will, trusting. Will, baring his vulnerable back, and the mark Hannibal left on the side of his throat that ties them together forever.

Mindful of the long skirt, Hannibal steps forward. Exhales. Pinches the base of the zipper between his fingers, and draws the zip to the top.

The dress is red, among other things.

There are elements of it that remind him of Will’s gown for the Symphony Gala, and yet it could not be more different—the sheer skirt, in this case, has an inside opaque liner that goes only to mid thigh, and the flowing chiffon is slit high up the leg. It will show Will’s shapely calves and thighs when he walks, when he moves, almost more of a train than it is a proper skirt. The bodice is floral. beaded lace on that same invisible paneling that splits at the sternum to artfully spread over his pectorals, where a woman’s breasts would fall. It rises in decals, blooms and vines that lift to his collarbones but do not touch, like skeletal fingers protecting his modesty, but only just. It leaves a startling amount of skin on exposé. No sleeves but for twin caps of lace on the crests of his shoulders, and though the bodice is form-fitting by necessity, the arm holes plunge to Will’s rib cage.

It’s risqué to border on inappropriate for a formal gathering. And yet, when Will’s shoulders roll back and he shows the austere column of his throat, when he leans back into Hannibal’s hands and meets Hannibal’s eyes in the mirror, it is his love that stares at him as though in challenge.

Hannibal touches his cheek to Will’s temple, and Will purrs like a lioness, fresh with blood from a kill. Perhaps, in this instance, Hannibal is his unsuspecting prey. He feels he should know better, and yet time and time again, Will finds new ways to stun him, strip him raw and bare.

Hannibal is breathless with it. And thinks, idly, of one of his many gifts to Will that waits on the counter with that thankless shopkeeper. The mental image makes him inhale sharply through his nose

—Will, a conqueror at his side, treading lightly through puddles of blood. A visual marvel… and Hannibal is a connoisseur of aesthetique.

“Wait here,” Hannibal murmurs against his ear, and Will shivers. “I have something for you.”

Will turns to look at him, eyes bright and curious. This time, though, he doesn’t protest. He nods once, and Hannibal takes it as permission; retreats from the changing room, through the shop.

He meets the still somewhat shell-shocked expression of the shopkeeper as he lifts the golden box from behind the counter, momentarily admires the contrast of the white lettering. “If I may.”

“Of course,” she says with a bobble-headed nod. Hannibal feels his smile freeze in place. Really, so useless. “Yeah, sure. And if you need another size, just let me know.”

“These should do nicely, but I certainly will, thank you.” Hannibal pauses. Tilts his head, and allows his smile to warm, his eyes to crinkle at the corners. “Do you happen to have a business card?”

“Oh. Uh, yeah.” The woman blinks—bottle-blonde, waifish. Far too much perfume. The kind of woman, he imagines, that if she had met Will on the street would not hesitate to sneer at him there, too; not just within this store where he’s her customer. All but a guest.

Anika Leopold — Assistant Manager

Well, she’d certainly never have made manager with her attitude, but Hannibal will see that she doesn’t make it there, regardless. “Thank you, Anika.”

She flushes, blotchy beneath the makeup she wears; Hannibal tucks the card beneath his thumb on the box’s lid and retreats with his quarry; a gift, and a prize of his own. He returns to Will with quick steps, finds him staring at his own reflection in a way that is not so admiring as it is terribly intense, gaze both focused and unfocused—but when Hannibal enters, the spell breaks, and Will looks up.

His lips part when he sees the box. *“Hannibal.”*

Hannibal holds out a hand, and Will takes it; allows himself to be led to the padded bench beside his folded clothes. Will sits. The slit of the skirt falls open, exposing nearly all his leg from thigh to ankle: pale, unblemished skin that begs for bruises, for teeth. Will licks his lips, a tiny nervous gesture, and gathers the skirt—tucks the top half back over his lap to both legs are equally exposed, and pushes the rest of the chiffon back under the bench, out of the way.

His pupils blow huge and black when Hannibal kneels. Hannibal’s sure he likely looks just the same; he slips the business card from beneath his thumb and into his pocket, and Will’s eyes catch it curiously—at least until he lifts the lid, lettered in elegant white cursive reading *Christian Louboutin Paris.*

The heels are narrow as the stiletto blades they’re named for; higher than Will usually wears, though not by much. They’re black, glossy patent leather with a scalloped body shape that tucks in daintily below the ankle, before it plunges to a pointed toe. The soles, the Louboutin trademark blood red, worn as a status symbol by so many women at the symphony and the opera. And why should Will not walk among them?

He lifts one from the box and lifts Will’s foot with the other; guides him into the shoe and leans forward, applying gentle pressure below the heel, and. Yes, as he thought, they seem to fit beautifully.

Hannibal exhales. He ducks his head, and Will's breath stutters when his mouth touches the inside of his knee, and higher, to the supple softness of his inner thigh.

Will's hand flexes at his side. Then, suddenly, like he cannot resist it at all, he threads his fingers into Hannibal's hair with a shivering sigh. Pets him in long, warm lines of sensation that raise gooseflesh on Hannibal's arms and back, concealed though they are.

"Hannibal," he whispers again.

"How does it feel, darling?"

"You?" Will asks breathily, head tipped back. "Or the pumps? Because both are… very, very nice."

"I'm glad to hear it." Hannibal slips the other one on; lavishes Will's other trembling thigh with a slow, sweet kiss, and regrets that despite that the amount he's spending would surely buy him leeway, it would be undoubtedly rude if he should carry such a private thing forward while directly in public, especially when it would make them late for their dinner reservation. When he leans back and stands, Will stares up at him like he is benediction itself, and the sense of affection and power is immense and warm in his belly.

Hannibal holds out his hands, and Will does not hesitate in taking them.

Will takes a moment to adjust once he's standing; shifts his weight between his legs, and the skirt swishes with the inertia of his movement. He tilts his head, lashes lowered, lips parted. So very lovely. He's nearly Hannibal's height like this—tall on his own, but the addition would make him a truly intimidating and formidable height for a woman; at least, to lesser men.

Fortunately for Hannibal, he is not lesser, and Will is not just a woman. He is so much more.

With the added lift of the heels, the skirt is the perfect length. Voluminous, but not dragging. Iridescent and sheer, and though the high heels are classic black leather, the shape is undeniably alluring. Appealing.

Will stares at himself in the mirror. His mouth is open, not just a little, and in his eyes is recognition. A spark of light from a creature seeing and knowing themselves, truly.

"I want this one," Will says softly, and Hannibal's arms encircle him from behind; hands spread over his waist, his ribs. He feels the heat of Will through the fabric, so thin he may as well be touching Will skin to skin.

"Then it's yours," Hannibal replies.

Will smiles. He shows all his teeth, sharp and small and white. He tips his head back to look at Hannibal without that thin barrier the mirror makes between them. "It's too bad I ruined that suit. It would have been perfect. We could have matched."

"I believe I have an alternative that will do quite well." Not as flashy as the last, but given what Will has selected, and that his confidence will be on full display, it's *Will* who Hannibal wants to shine. Hannibal will be known to everyone of note. Let his beloved draw the eyes at this event, as it should be. Hannibal rubs his mouth at the bite mark, and Will shivers; then forward, over the soft, curved shell of his ear. Hannibal catches the lobe between his teeth and nips. Will arches into his hands. "I may have to buy you a new pair of earrings, something worthy to accompany an outfit as ruinous as this."

Will barks a laugh. “You haven’t bought enough things for one day? Your accountant must hate me.”

Hannibal studiously ignores him. The image of lush metals and gleaming stones takes form in his mind, Will draped in senseless opulence. Cared for. *Kept, like a pet,* as Will once called himself. And oh, Hannibal detests the idea of Will being a pet, but he will settle for nothing less than keeping Will for as long as they live. “Garnets, maybe. Or rubies. Do you prefer white gold or yellow?”

“For your own good, I’m not gonna answer that question,” Will replies, and it’s barely breath with how overwhelmed he seems, but he’s smiling.

But now that he’s asked it, Hannibal pauses. Possibilities come to mind, implications. Thoughts. And he thinks back to everything he’s ever seen Will wear, and notes silver studs and fastenings in the halls of his own memory. No yellow gold that he can recall. Notes the preference, even though Will refuses to answer.

He gentles his teeth. Touches his lips to Will’s jaw and hears him hum, something softer now, something affectionate. It’s a sound that Hannibal absorbs, that fills his chest with devastating love in a manner new and unfamiliar before Will Graham. His love. His only. Here, resting against his chest in a gown worthy of Aphrodite, high heels that remind him of Athena on the fields of war. A young god and goddess sharing one body, marked by his teeth. Bound to him by blood.

The love of his life.

The thought stuns him momentarily—has been similarly expressed in sentiment, but never quite so plainly. It temporarily puts Hannibal off-balance. He gathers his thoughts as best he can, and hopes he doesn’t sound as winded as he feels. “Very well. I’ll simply have to make an educated guess.”

He retreats, and Will whines at the loss of Hannibal’s warmth against his back. It’s a viscerally pleasing sound, especially in tandem with his shiver when Hannibal undoes the zipper and leaves the fabric slouching around his waist.

“Get undressed. I’ll go gather something for you to wear for dinner.”

“Hannibal—” Will turns, holding up the dress in the front with splayed palms over his chest, but his eyes are now soft and wide. Hannibal tilts his head as Will steps forward, and the high heels click against the wooden floor as he tilts his chin for a slow, sweet kiss. His lashes flutter open, eyes the barest glimmers of blue. “Thank you.”

“You’re most welcome, mylimasis,” Hannibal replies; cups Will’s cheeks in his palms and kisses the crown of his head, his unbound and untamed curls. Imagines how radiant he’ll be, and finds he cannot put a name to the feeling of adoration beyond *love,* beyond *devotion,* and wonders if this is simply what it *feels* like.

It seems too much for just anyone to be blessed with. Perhaps, then, it is unique to only the two of them.

Will looks up at him as he pulls away. When he smiles, Hannibal thinks that yes, that must be it.

Will exits the dressing room in high-waisted, skin tight black pants and a tucked-in striped button-down, collar undone. His hair is loose, pretty, and his worn heeled boots are tucked away in the golden box. Will wears the Louboutins.

Hannibal helps him into a new coat—boiled wool, hunter-green, with brass buttons and a black fleece collar. It's feminine-cut, but with the right accessories, it would not be difficult to pass this off as a gentleman's jacket. Will smiles, nostrils flared with irritation, but cheeks flushed with pleasure. It's undoubtedly to his taste: Hannibal knows him well, and Will presses a quick, affectionate peck to the corner of his mouth in thanks.

Will turns his eyes to the shop attendant, having adopted the skin of someone completely different than who he arrived as. A chameleon, as shifting and stunning as the weather, as the seas.

"Thank you for all your help," he says sweetly, and as he leaves toting armfuls of designer bags, he can't stop laughing at her stunned expression, not even for long enough to scold Hannibal for the extravagance.

"Are you sure you have to go?" Hannibal asks, Will's back pressed against the passenger's side of the Bentley, boxed in before he could sit and determine their destination.

"My car's at school," Will gasps, head rolled back as Hannibal mouths at the faded bruise on Will's neck, almost gone from between the red scars of his teeth. He clutches at Hannibal's back and at his hair all the same—pulling, not pushing. "I didn't ask Sarah to watch Winston."

"You could text her now. I could drive you in the morning."

"You have to *work* in the morning—ah, fuck."

Hannibal laps at his pulse, imagines he can taste the life thrumming beneath Will's skin. God, but he's beautiful. A stunning little thing, growing broader and bolder all the time beneath his hands. Becoming larger than life itself: becoming Hannibal's muse, his reason for being—to awaken him. To share this with him.

To share *everything* with him, morning, noon, and night. Every sunrise. Every sunset. Every meal, every rest. Every breath.

He will not ask Will to come home with him. It would be fundamentally selfish to do so, knowing the importance of his studies, knowing how close Will is to success, and wanting to foster that success. He has so many reasons not to, wanting Will to succeed with his tests, and more importantly, knowing what he knows about how important it is that Will gets home tonight—

"Come home with me, darling."

—but he wants Will to himself. *Just* himself, in a way that can't be doubted, or given someone else's name.

"I can't," Will moans, high and frantic, pawing at Hannibal in poorly-restrained desire, *begging* him for mercy and understanding. "I want to, you *know* I want to. And I already asked her to watch him over break. I'll be with you all the time. I just gotta get through next week. Finish my tests. *Oh…"*

Will is hard, hot, squirming and relentless, even through their clothing, and Hannibal wants him so badly. Wants to lie him down on his back or his belly, drink his fill of Will's body, every taste and touch and scent and sensation he has to give. *Every* one.

But he gentles his hands. Softens his grip. Breathes hard against Will's cheek and touches him, knowing that Will is going to be back to him Saturday, if not sooner. Either way, soon, soon, soon.

And Will has more to discover in the interim. Crucial developments, which he has to let his darling find if he's to indulge his own pride of being seen, if *only* by Will.

Hannibal kisses him. He's calm this time, though Will's chest heaves with blood and breath. "I know. I know." Kisses Will's mouth, slack with helpless sound, with pleasure. "Forgive me, my love. Your absence makes me not much more than a beast who waits and wants for your return. Not unlike your dog at home."

Will huffs a disbelieving breath. Noses him, nuzzles him, ever-merciful, but ever-weak to the desires of his young, hormone-addled body. At least he seems to maintain enough sense for the both of them. "You've never been a dog, Hannibal. You know that as well as I do." Will's eyes flash in the gloom, bright with amusement and intelligence, and with simple, basic want. And still, his arms loop around Hannibal's neck. He tucks his face into the curve of his shoulder and holds, holds, holds; clings, like he never wants to be parted, despite his very protests for exactly that. Exhales, hot and wet against Hannibal's neck. Then kisses his shoulder over the shadow of his own bite, lingering even through thick wool.

They're silent for a time, recovering. Food sits hot and rich in their bellies, the sweet taste of wine, the warmth from which has faded. Hannibal smooths his hands over the shoulders of Will's new coat, much better-fitted to him than the last—but surely not the last of the gifts Hannibal will bestow upon him.

"Okay," Will murmurs. Breathes. And again. "Okay. Okay, alright. I've gotta get to my car so I can go home."

"What happened to studying all night?"

"I'll study all night *tomorrow* night," Will grumbles. Holds Hannibal even tighter, which is not much incentive at all to let him go, until he does. "Mmph. Okay, take me back." He taps Hannibal's chest with an open palm, lashes lowered, not making eye contact. "Or I'll never go."

Hannibal nods. He must. Doesn't want to—*has* to. "Someday soon, I hope you won't have to."

Will looks up at him, lips parted, eyes soft. His expression is one of a person stunned to silence… at least until he smiles. Cracks open with it, like he couldn't hold it inside his ribs, even to save his life.

Desperate, glowing with desire and want that they both vibrate with, Will touches his forehead to Hannibal's jaw. He's warm, almost feverish with hope they share, and he whispers, "Me too."

The drive home is agonizing. The designer bags rattle in paper and plastic sounds as Will's wheels whir over the road, as he pulls into the driveway. It's noise and nonsense and he regrets turning

Hannibal down so goddamn badly that he wishes he hadn't, even though he had to.

He has work to do tonight, a meeting with Abel tomorrow, and this was not an excursion he planned, but one he desperately wanted. Wanted to see Hannibal. And maybe it's selfish to try to have everything (or maybe just stupid), but Will's toes curl inside his boots that he donned when he got to his car, and he can't help but remember the soft and succulent leather of the *fucking Louboutins, God, Hannibal really just—*

Will doesn't even want to think about how much money Hannibal spent on him today. It's likely enough to finance the whole of his education, and, really, even with how far they've come, the thought of such extravagance is…

Fuck, those *shoes.*

Will rubs a hand over his face as he pulls up to the house and puts the Volvo in park. Jesus, but the way Hannibal touched him, the way he stared at Will as though he were the most beautiful, powerful thing alive—it's a powerful thing in and of itself to be beheld like that. Wilhelmina flexes her claws beneath his skin with the desire to take and claim, careless of the knowledge that Hannibal is already knowingly theirs, taken *and* claimed. He's owned, and they are owned, and they own one another until this whole thing either escapes the jaws of death that seek to crush them, or until it comes to an end with blood and flame.

And the end grows nearer every day, doesn't it? Just a handful of days left to the hospital benefit, and then from there, Will is sure to have all he needs to deceive everyone who trusts him, up to and including Hannibal.

He peels his hands away from his eyes, sore and swollen though they are with exhaustion. He has to get inside, Winston probably has to pee, and he lifts his head—

Illuminated by the dull glow of the headlights, there's a box on his porch.

He hasn't ordered anything that hasn't already arrived.

Which means—

Will turns off the car with shaking hands and is out in the snow and ice and cold in a second. He doesn't collect the bags from the car. He goes to the porch and climbs the steps, glad in this moment that he had the sense to change back into his old boots. He picks the box up. Turns it to the side, and inside, there is a hollow *sliiiide-thump.*

He doesn't breathe as he unlocks the door and Winston barrels past him into the night. No, he elbows frantically at the light switch to turn it on, and makes it no further inside the door than it takes to turn and put the box on the foot of his bed. It's brown cardboard, not even wrapped with paper. Like a shoe box, there is a lid.

When he lifts it, his heartbeat stills at the sight of the still, dead heart that rests inside it, now rolled off-center from where it was set lovingly, surrounded by a length of rope, fashioned into a noose. Threaded into the knot, a cluster of red flowers the color of blood.

When did he even—

Will puts a hand over his mouth. Closes his eyes. Hannibal must have left it before he came to pick him up at school. But why, then, did he ask Will to come home with him tonight? Surely a gift like

this was left with the intention of it being found. The cold is enough that it could surely wait a little time without being ruined, but until morning? That's a danger Will knows Hannibal knows better than to risk, even unknowing of what Will has embroiled himself in with the FBI and Abel Gideon.

So…

A possibility flickers at the forefront of his mind, there and as immediately dismissed. No, Will is *positive.* There's no other possibility when it comes to the Ripper's identity. Hannibal asking him home tonight must have been a diversion he knew Will would deny, a plot to divert suspicion. A clever one that Will is now glad he turned down.

The message in this is clear. A heart. A noose. *I got your message,* this says. And the flowers…

Will swallows hard. Stares into the box, then turns on his heel. Knocks books off the top of the old piano in his search for his plant index and rips it free. Balances the book between both arms, large as it is. Flips through pages at lightning's pace, until—

The color is different in this picture, but the shape is the same. *Color variations,* the entry says, *selective depending on breeding.* A cluster of white stamens, blooms tightly bunched together on a thin stalk with long, ovular leaves. A perennial plant, growing and blooming and dying each year.

Sweet William.

"You *asshole,"* Will whispers, even as his heart thumps hard in his chest. He can practically hear Hannibal's voice in his ear, a quiet, loving purr.

I will wait for you, darling. As long as I have to.

Will snaps the book closed and sets it on the piano bench. He approaches the open box.

This heart is smaller than the one from the doe they hunted. Will knows without a doubt that it's human. And he knows Hannibal well enough to know that, with this one, there will be no display. No monument to his own greatness. No, this one is solely for Will, and for his benefit only.

Message received.

But as Will stares down at the heart, he is struck with a thought that he cannot even blame on Wilhelmina. The voice inside his head is solely his own.

What a waste.

And a second thought, ricocheting through his body like thunder after a lightning strike: *Only if I don't eat it.*

He swallows hard. Considers several things in short accord.

One: the heart is already trimmed, though not yet sliced or butterflied. When Will holds his hand just over the surface, it's undoubtedly still cold, and it's below freezing outside. As Hannibal taught him with the doe's organs, the color is good. When he lifts the box to his nose, it smells fresh. Will has never indicated that he was aware of the Ripper's cannibalism, but it's clear to Will as someone who is familiar with food-grade preparation of offal that this is meant to be an ingredient, meant to be eaten.

Two: Will has knowingly indulged in Hannibal's practices every time he's eaten at Hannibal's home, and likely every time Hannibal has ever fed him something homemade. To turn this down simply on the principle that would be Will's own hand doing the cooking seems a shallow argument at best. From the first time he accepted Hannibal's food, knowing his identity and purpose, Will lost the moral high ground to turn up his nose at an offering like this.

Three: oh, Will can just imagine Hannibal's face, imagine his shock and burning desire once he knows that Will's aware of the Ripper's darkest secret, and has so unexpectedly indulged in the honor Hannibal has bestowed him.

And, four: it's been a few hours since dinner. Will's not actively hungry…

…but he could eat.

And that is reason enough.

Will carries the box to the kitchen and sets it on the counter. Then he inhales, exhales, pats the pocket where his keys reside, and goes to fetch his new belongings from the car.

If he's going to be standing for a while, he may as well take the opportunity to break in his new shoes.

Music plays low from his laptop, waiting open on the counter. Will hums along as he glances at the web page, following the instructions step by step as he trims the last of the heartstrings. The knife is sharp and slices through the flesh like ripe fruit; his heels click on the floor as Will sways on his feet, small steps in time to the beat, growing used to the narrow point that holds him upright. It seems almost fitting, as he uses the thinnest and sharpest of his fish de-boning knives to flay the heart open.

A cast iron skillet sizzles on the rangetop. The air is fragrant with the scent of garlic-olive oil. Will pats the heart dry of moisture with paper towel and sets aside the refuse to be later burned; idly, easily drops a piece of gristle to Winston, who lies in front of the counter, well-trained and patient, and who knows better than to beg.

Will cracks salt and pepper onto the outside of the heart, peeled from its silver skin; flips it, and repeats on the other side. The open kitchen window brings with it a gust of cold air, but Will doesn't shiver, and as far as he is from his nearest neighbors, there is no worry of being seen. The skillet is screaming hot, the oil smoking, and when Will lies the flayed heart gently into the pan, it pops and hisses with the high heat. A few minutes on the first side, a few minutes on the other. By all accounts of seasoned hunters, the heart is a muscle like any other, and when properly prepared, tastes more like a steak than it does like organ meat.

He washes the cutting board while the first side sears, and returns to flip the heart with a pair of tongs. The scent of flesh is mouth-watering, even so soon after the decadent meal he and Hannibal shared. But surely Hannibal wouldn't begrudge him following his supper with the fruits of his own labor.

He smiles; pulls the cork from his bottle of whiskey, and drizzles it over the meat. Just a little. Just enough that as he tips the pan, it bursts into flame, quickly burning down the flavor to a concentrated oak-barreled smokiness that will glaze the flesh it coats.

A quick sear; trimmed as it is, the heart isn't thick, and it wouldn't take much to overcook. Will pulls it from the pan and sets it on his cleaned cutting board to rest. It'll get a more comprehensive bleach-soak when he's done. The skillet, well—given a few more steaks on a high-heat sear, any DNA will be meaningless, and not even luminol can tell the difference between human and animal blood.

Will turns the burner off and takes the pan from the heat; leaves it to rest and spins in place while he waits, imagining the weight of the skirt around his legs again, the heat of Hannibal's breath, his lips against Will's thigh. Out, spin in, keeping time in his mind to an ambling count of four as the song changes over to a low, bluesy piano and a guitar chiming like a clock striking midnight.

"Give your heart and soul to charity," Will sings softly, lips curling on a vicious and tender smile. *"'cause the rest of you, the best of you…"*

His phone rings. Will freezes, stock-still, until he sees the caller ID: *Hannibal Lecter.*

Will inhales, minds racing. And then his shoulders relax. His smile widens. And Will turns his back on his cell phone, waiting on the kitchen counter. He lets it go to voicemail, a loving, doting partner's goodnight call gone unanswered. Let Hannibal think him preoccupied with the Ripper's gift, leave him burning with curiosity as to Will's reaction. There will be no secret message forthcoming tonight. It will not come a moment sooner than exactly when Will intends it.

He picks up the plate bearing the heart, medium-rare, his fork and knife, and carries it all to the dining room. The siren song of hell on earth syncopates with the click of his high heels on the hardwood floors, and Will's voice echoing through the halls.

"...honey, belongs to me."

Chapter End Notes

Wilhelmina's (and now Will's) Gown and The Louboutins.

The song Will is singing at the end is NFWMB by Hozier. Please also give the upscaled version a listen if you'd like to hear a song that perfectly embodies Wilhelmina's vibe.

3:11

Chapter Notes

HAPPY 300k EVERYONE!! HOOOO BUDDY. You know, I joked about this when Headlines grew a plot. I only halfway took myself seriously. AND IT HAPPENED RIGHT IN TIME FOR THE ONE-YEAR ANNIVERSARY OF STARTING THIS FIC!! \o/ Thank you to everyone who has come on this journey with me and gotten this far. This fic would not exist as it is without the continued support of everyone who's read it along the way. We're finally gearing up and getting into the final stretch. My early guess is we've probably got about ten chapters left, or somewhere in that vicinity.

That said, PLEASE keep your eyes out. If I manage to impress myself, and if these lovely characters want to cooperate, there might be more coming your way very soon.....

ONWARD TO 400k!!! (god, I hope not, but you know what? at this rate....)

It's more important now than ever that any contact between Will Graham and Abel Gideon is minimized to the point of appearing nonexistent. It's one of the many reasons that they meet in their cars in shaded, unlit areas where darkened vehicles go unnoticed; why Will insisted on Abel getting a burner cell, and they no longer communicate via text message; short calls only to share time and location, no recorded messages. No evidence against them. And when they meet, both phones were turned off at home, SIM cards removed. They meet at the spot and wait for half an hour. If one doesn't show, the other is to leave and wait to be contacted.

As of yet, it's all been smooth sailing. Of course, no one has any idea what they're planning, and conspiracy to commit murder is only a crime if they're caught.

Tonight, Will is feeling nostalgic. It's their last meeting before the hospital benefit. Will suspects there will only be one more after this. And in the wake of the progress that Annalise believes she and her husband are making, Abel has no wish to stray far from home.

Will meets him at the bridge atop the overpass. His hair is up, his face is rough, it's Thursday night and Jack Crawford spent the earlier hours of the afternoon breathing down Will's neck. Will promised him answers after the benefit. He's yet to determine how, exactly, he will deliver those answers, but he's always been good at improvisation. He has half of a plan. He'll wing the rest.

Will imagines Annalise's body hanging here. Despite the fact that he's already decided on his own design, he likes the thought of it.

"I'll have to move her," Will says softly, and his voice is lost to the sound of rushing cars below. "If we give them your house, we give them too much evidence. The Ripper's kills have always been clean. Untraceable. If we want to pass this off as his, we'll have to be just as good."

“I don’t see how I can kill her cleanly,” Abel mutters. “It’ll have to be at home. It’s not like I have a dungeon to take her down to and bleed her out.”

The words ping something in Will’s brain. *A dungeon.*

All this time he’s known, theoretically, that the Ripper had to have somewhere to do his work. But he’s never married that knowledge with his insider intel of Hannibal’s identity.

Hannibal has to have somewhere to do his work. A quiet, secure space.

Where is it?

“Then you’ll have to be careful,” Will replies. He lifts his head, looks at Abel. He’s enshrouded beneath the cloudy night, illuminated in strobes by the rushing cars below. He has a hat pulled low over his hair, twisted and pinned against his skull, out of sight. He taps the steel toe of his work boots against the concrete barricade. “You’re a surgeon. You know how to protect yourself from biological contamination. You need to think like a surgeon when you do it.”

Abel’s lip twitches. At heart, he is a man of action—of instinct, of passion. This approach does not agree with him. “This is sounding less and less freeing by the minute.”

“It’s only freeing in practice,” Will replies sharply. Anger builds in his chest; his derision can’t be contained. “If you opt for freedom in her killing, you’ll be behind bars for the rest of your life. But if you approach this with tact and *forethought,* you’ll be *free* the rest of your life. You can’t have both.” Will scowls and shoots him a sidelong glance. “And I can’t work with both. I need a clean canvas. And *you* need to hope your hands are as steady as *his,* or no one’s gonna believe us.”

Abel makes a sound of frustration; pounds his open palm on the barricade, but Will doesn’t flinch or falter. He stares stonily at his co-conspirator and reminds himself *for Hannibal, this is for Hannibal.* And he can’t alienate Abel now.

Will sighs in a bluster of steam. The black fleece collar is warm around his neck, and only his nape feels the chill. He drops his head like the fight has gone from him, but it hasn’t. It’s still waiting, just as ready as it’s ever been. “We only have one chance,” he whispers. “I… just don’t want either of us to get caught.”

“Part of me wishes I could just have this to myself,” Abel says, but it doesn’t sound like disagreement. Frustrated melancholy, that even the murder of his wife will be sacrificed to someone else’s purposes. Ever the puppet, ever the pawn, so willingly subjecting himself to being directed by Will’s hands instead of his wife’s.

He hasn’t learned at all.

“I wish you could, too,” Will lies, gentle. “But we’re close. We’re really close, Abel. And I need you to trust that I know where the FBI are at. And, if I can, I’m going to point them right at Mason during the hospital benefit once we poke him and he lashes out. It’ll be a bug in the ear of Jack Crawford, and from there, he’ll already have the idea in his head when Annalise turns up.”

He turns to look at Abel as a vehicle with LED headlights goes past below, and their bodies flash like white-blue lightning in the dark. It’s almost what it felt like, when Will saw The Hanged Man for the first time.

“We can do this, you know.”

Yes, Wilhelmina says, *we can.*

"I'm going to get evidence against Mason. Then, it's just a matter of time. Another week or two. Probably before the New Year. And we'll be *safe."* Will swallows. Reaches out, and rests his gloved hand over the back of Abel Gideon's. Meets his manic, blazing eyes in the pitch black.

There are no cars oncoming. For the moment, it's only them.

"Tell me you're with me," Will says.

"I am," Abel replies.

Will exhales. Nods. "Then wait for my call. We're in the home stretch. A little time, a little chaos, and then it'll be over. We can go back to living our lives."

Abel is silent for a moment. He looks down over the barricade, face nearly pressed to the fence, looking down at the highway below. "Hannibal said you weren't here the day it happened. But you were, weren't you?"

Will purses his lips. When Abel's eyes find his, Will sighs through his nose. "Yeah. I saw it." Inhales, then—"It was for me."

He stares at Will. Through him. Perceptive in a way only an intelligent, insightful man with the heart of a murderer could be. He cocks his head. His eyes are dark. "You know, you've asked me if I'm sure of the choice I'm making. And I am, don't get me wrong—but you don't have anyone to ask *you* that question, do you?"

Abel is a hyena, a laughing menace, looking for weakness in the prowling lion.

He won't find it.

"Are you sure, Will? That this is what you want?"

Will jams his hands into the pockets of the coat Hannibal bought him. The stubble on his face itches; he's ready to shed it.

"Hannibal is worth everything to me. Everything." Will's shoulders hunch. "I have finals after the Johns Hopkins fundraiser. It might take me a few days to get things straightened out. Wait for my call before you make a move."

Gideon's keys jingle as he pulls them from his pocket. "Roger that, boss," he mutters.

"Then I'll see you Saturday."

"Wouldn't miss it."

Will retreats to the Volvo, parked in the shadows. On the drive home, he thinks of Abby, thinks of Clarice, and wonders if they'll ever be happy, despite what destruction Hannibal's impulsiveness cost their lives.

But he doesn't want to think about that anymore. He presses *dial*.

"Hey. I need to see you before Saturday. Can you come over tomorrow?"

A sigh crackles over the line—an indulgent one. *"How about tonight?"*

It's late, but it'll work. "You're a lifesaver. Takeout's on me."

She laughs. *"Don't break the bank, sugar baby."*

The tension of the night fades from Will's shoulders. He smiles. "You can take a look at my closet and decide who broke the bank."

Margot makes a sound of deep, deep intrigue. *"Oh hell yeah,"* she drawls. *"Now we're talkin'."*

When the dishes are cleared away and the curtains are drawn, Margot settles into the recliner much like a general sitting at the round table, preparing for war. Her red cast is her battle flag, declaring her sovereignty over her family name—she and Will united in their goal to return her power within the walls of her ancestral home.

She doesn't know everything. Some secrets are not Will's to tell—but she knows the most out of everyone, and that is enough.

She eyes the sweet williams, set in a glass cup atop the old piano. Innocent enough to the unsuspecting, but Margot knows he's not the type for flowers.

Will leans back against the bed frame. His hands fold over his lap. "I'm about to do something really stupid."

"Reckless," Margot says. She tilts her head, eyes narrowed and shrewd. "You're never stupid."

"I don't know if reckless is the right word for something I've put so much thought into." Will scritches behind Winston's ears, curled as he is at Will's side.

"I'm assuming you don't plan on getting caught."

"No," Will acknowledges. "I don't."

"But someone has to."

He nods once. "Someone."

Margot presses her lips together. She exhales gently through her nose. "Not me," she says, and it's not a question, but nor is it a demand. It's a fact she knows intrinsically.

"Definitely not you." Will pauses. Here is where the lies converge. Here is the person who will know enough to condemn him if this whole thing goes wrong. "But I do need your help."

"I told you I'd give it."

Will nods once. Then, with a breath, he stands, and gestures for her to do the same. He holds his hand out, and she meets his eyes; understands, and places her casted arm upon his palm.

“I know it’s still a little early,” Will murmurs. “But I need you out of this cast. You can tell your dad the hospital did it. I’ll tell Hannibal your family doctor did it.”

“Why?”

“Trust me.” Till tilts his head. Looks at her—pale as he, just about his height. “It’ll be more comfortable with the splint, anyway. It’s a lot lighter.”

“And I assume you plan on sawing this thing off.”

“That’s the idea, yeah.” Will searches her face. “I need some of Mason’s hair.”

Margot’s nose wrinkles. She takes her arm back, and looks resigned, but not altogether unhappy; shows her teeth in a wary grimace, an animal thing, tinged with fear. But she’s smart. She connects the dots. “You’ve been planning this for a while, haven’t you? It’s why you were on the grounds that night.”

Will exhales. “Kind of, yeah.”

“Since when?”

“Since he hurt you.”

“Will—”

“This isn’t just about him,” Will snaps. He’s not in the mood to defend himself, his decisions. “There’s more to it. Mason’s just… bird one.”

Margot’s eyes flicker to the flowers, then back to Will. “What’s bird two?”

Will takes her by the shoulders; pushes her gently, until her calves hit the recliner and she reflexively sits. Until Will goes to the his toolbox beneath the fly-tying table and comes back with a hacksaw in one hand and a metal shoehorn in the other, which he hands to her, curve-down. “Put this down the end of your cast to protect your arm. I’m not going to cut you, but this’ll make sure of it.”

She does, and the shoehorn slips in from her forearm to the side of her hand. Will waits until it pokes out the other end before he turns her arm and gets to work. The fiberglass dust falls in a stream onto the floor as he cuts. Margot covers her nose and mouth with the sleeve of her shirt.

The cast cracks open. Margot winces as Will grabs it in his hands and breaks it, and it splits in twin halves of cotton lining and hardened fiberglass. Her arm within is pale, a little clammy, just like his was. It feels like rewinding in time.

Will brings her to the kitchen sink so she can gently wash it clean, pat it dry with paper towels, and he fetches the velcro splint for her. When she straps it on, there’s an expression of puzzlement, and then relief. “Jesus, this is way more comfortable.”

Will agrees. He tosses the halves of Margot’s cast into the trash. He’ll vacuum the living room floor later. “Do you want some advil?”

Margot washes a pair of pills down with a mug full of tap water. Follows him back into the living room from there, and when Will returns to sit on the bed, she pauses in the doorway and looks at the flowers.

Will inhales through his nose. He sighs. “Bird two is the Ripper.”

Her eyes snap back to the flowers with new understanding. The color drains from her face. “Are you serious?”

“He needs to be stopped,” Will replies. He draws his legs in, beneath him. Sits up, spine straight, and watches her. “And I’m gonna draw him out.”

The wheels turn behind Margot’s eyes. Finally, she comes to the bed. Climbs onto the mattress and sits, cross-legged, across from Will. Her voice is quiet, urgent. “You’re going to make Mason look like one of his?”

“That’s the idea.”

“But he’ll know it wasn’t,” she protests.

“But,” Will says, “he’ll know it was me. And he’ll be curious.”

“But that doesn’t solve anything. You still won’t know where he is.” Margot’s brows draw together, worried and perplexed.

Will huffs a quiet laugh and reaches out to lay his hand over hers. His eyes fall to them—his are bigger than hers, but not by much—and then they lift, and he looks at her from beneath his lashes. “I’ll know where he’s going.”

Margot exhales quietly. She, too, looks down at their joined hands. “Will.”

“Margot. I need you to trust me. You, of all people.” Will’s smile falters. “Just in case something happens. I’m going to be careful, and I’ve planned this as well as I can. And I know what I’m doing is wrong by the word of the law, but it’s the right thing.”

Margot’s hand tightens weakly around his, not unlike an infant squeezing its parent’s fingers for the first time. A fledgling murderer. “What about Hannibal?”

“Believe me, everything I am doing is with the express purpose of keeping him safe,” Will murmurs. “Even if I go down for it.”

She looks up at that. Her eyes flash as she looks between each of Will’s. “He doesn’t know?”

“What would I say?” Will asks helplessly, and Margot’s shoulders sag. He’s right; she knows it. “If he knows nothing, he’s safe. It’s plausible deniability. If I succeed, then the Ripper’s in jail, and he and I can just… live our lives. And if I fail…”

Dread blooms within Will’s ribs. He hasn’t allowed himself to consider the possibility, but the likelihood of failure is high. He’s doing his best to cover all his bases, lay contingency plans, but—

“If you get caught, I’ll get you out,” Margot says with a firm nod. “Daddy hasn’t amended his will yet. If Mason’s gone, I’m the heir. He won’t alienate me without another one lined up, and with Mama dead—” She swallows hard. “I’ll get you the best lawyer in the world if I have to.”

“I’ll come to you once finals are done,” Will says softly. He licks his lips. “I have a plan, a real one. But tomorrow, I need you to bring me some of his hair. Just off a jacket or something. And…”

Margot nods once. But at his extended silence, her brows lift. “And?”

“I’m gonna need to cause a scene.” Will looks up, apologetic. “You’ll probably want to be out of his way afterward.”

“I’ll go to Alana’s.” At that, Margot smiles, and she looks truly happy. “She invited me over after. I guess her mentor is bringing her as her plus-one again. Invaluable networking and all that stuff.”

Will snorts, shrugs. “That’s supposedly what I’m there for.”

“It’s crazy how shit changes when you fall in love.”

Will leans back on the bed until his back is flat. He laughs, soft, and says, “Tell me about it.”

“Holy *shit,* hon, these Louboutins. The good doctor has *excellent* taste—oh my God, Prada? And Fendi? He did some *serious* damage.”

Will cocks his head, his hip, and smiles. “Wait ‘til you see the dress.”

The next morning blooms bright with sunshine, cold and crisp. It’s Friday, the last day of classes before finals start on Monday; by next Wednesday, the semester will be done. Will packs his go bag for the last segment of campus news, and every garment is designer, is *new*—a sheer blouse, a silk camisole, a leather calfskin skirt that’s soft as butter as Will places it lovingly into the duffel.

Hannibal must be going crazy. Two days, not even a text, and Will hasn’t posted an article yet about the Ripper’s *gift.* But he will… when he’s ready.

The sense of power over Hannibal has become nearly addicting. It might even be a problem, if Hannibal weren’t so keen on gaining power over Will in turn. It’s made this whole gambit a high-risk game, albeit one Will cares desperately about the outcome of. It makes the play enthralling, but the consequences so much more severe.

But Hannibal will be safe. With or without Will, Hannibal will make it out of this.

Fortunately, though, the game is not yet done.

Hannibal is likely sleeping right now, coming off an all-nighter shift that melds into another this afternoon. Even the Ripper needs to rest, so Will doesn’t bother him with platitudes. There’ll be enough time for that later.

The steering wheel vibrates gently beneath Will’s hands. The Volvo slips beneath The Hanged Man’s overpass and over the Maryland state line. All the world and all the day lies ahead of him.

Will hums along to the radio as he drives.

"Thank you," Will whispers emphatically with a wink as he passes the nurse's station. Bernadette grins, muffling her laughter behind her hand and deliberately looks the other way, shaking her head.

Will smiles the whole way downstairs and hums his satisfaction when he types the entry code into Hannibal's office door. It's empty, of course; he's in the OR, and probably will be for nearly another hour, but that doesn't matter. Will closes the door behind him and sets his bag on the floor; shifts on the heels as he sweeps the coat off, and bites his lower lip with a quiet, wanting whine.

Not yet.

He sets it over the back of Hannibal's office chair and sinks into it, clasp undone and skirt unzipped, blouse unbuttoned and hanging open over the red lace bralette that hugs his rib cage. It wouldn't do for wear under tomorrow evening's dress; after all, it would show through the sheer paneling. But for the average, everyday office liaison, it'll do just fine.

Will's hair is loose, unbound around his face and shoulders. He turns sideways in the chair and pulls his legs up, resting the pointed toes of the Louboutins against the handle of one of the desk drawers, and adjusts his weight—

Catches his breath. Licks his lips. Right, maybe best not to move.

Given time, though, he stretches. Luxuriates. Kicks his calves up over the corner of Hannibal's desk, braces his arm against the face of it, and his cheek in the crook of his elbow. Of course, this is the hazard of trying to surprise a doctor, *ever;* an unexpected medical event can ruin the whole attempt if the stars don't align.

It is fortunate, then, that Will perks up when he hears footsteps in the hall, and the swipe of an access card to bypass the manual entry code. He tips his head back against the seat, smiling to himself, and the door opens.

Hannibal freezes in the doorway when he realizes he is not alone. His mouth opens. Licks his lips. Swallows. His pupils dilate. "Will."

"Hey," Will replies with a bright, cocky smile. "You gonna close the door or what?"

He does, but doesn't come closer. Will preens. He's not threatened in the least at being in closed quarters, boxed in; he knows what he's here for, and he wants what he wants.

Hannibal, it seems, does not. "Darling, what are you doing?"

Will huffs through his nose, amused. "Waiting for you. Thought that was obvious." Will swings his legs down from Hannibal's desk; he bears his teeth in a snarling smile as he stands and shudders. God, it feels so—"I missed you."

He watches a thread of confusion pass Hannibal's face and it's delightful. It's surely not what he expected from his next interaction with Will, and Will can practically *hear* his rushing thoughts, trying to put together a timeline of the last few days that may or may not include the gift he left on the porch in Wolf Trap. The alarm, conflicting with new and sudden desire as Will steps forward, and the undone skirt slips down his narrow waist, exposing the red lace underwear, the half-hard swell of his erection within them.

Hannibal's palms curl around Will's hips and stop the skirt from falling any lower. Sensual as he is, he can't help but run his palms over the leather. Will leans into him and purrs when Hannibal cups his ass; leans up to brush his lips against Hannibal's jaw. He smells like rubbing alcohol and iodine, but Will doesn't care about that. He nudges his leg forward, brushes his upper thigh against Hannibal's groin. Looks up through his lashes and smirks. "It's been a while since I visited you at the hospital."

"I could have been in surgery quite a while longer," Hannibal scolds gently, but he doesn't push Will away. His eyes fall from Will's face; settle on the vivid red of the lingerie; he exhales through his nose when Will rolls his shoulders back, his head back, showing off the scar on his neck as he presses their bodies together.

"I would have waited," Will purrs. "Do you have time?"

"I have an hour for lunch, unless some drastic emergency should arise." Helpless, Hannibal ducks his face to Will's throat and inhales the scent of him; Will knows he smells of his shampoo, hand lotion, his makeup. Maybe this morning's coffee. And—

Hannibal stills. Pushes his hands down the back of Will's skirt, forcing it down over his ass and trapping it between them. Then slips one hand into the back of Will's panties, between his cheeks, and touches the slender, flared base of the silicone plug Will ordered at the same time as his lingerie.

Hannibal exhales hard. Will rumbles his assent, his amused and interested pleasure, and slips his hands into Hannibal's hair. Fists. Tugs gently. "Then we should hurry up, shouldn't we?"

Hannibal's teeth snap together right beside Will's ear; he disengages only enough to push Will's skirt the rest of the way down, to let it pool around Will's ankles and give him room to step out of it before Hannibal kicks it aside. Just enough room to push the blouse back over Will's pale shoulders and let it catch around his forearms, and for Will to shrug it off and drop it into the seat of the office chair. Just enough room between Will and his desk to grab Will behind his thighs and lift him onto it; just enough room between their mouths to swallow Will's overwhelmed moan as the plug shifts inside him and presses firmly against his prostate.

"Fuck," Will moans softly, and lies back across the surface of Hannibal's desk; squirms and digs his nails into the wood when Hannibal pulls the lace panties out of the way, grips the base of the plug and tugs, before he pushes it back inside. "Oh, goddamn. Hannibal—"

"Be still," Hannibal murmurs, and sounds gutted. Pained. Hooked. "You've closed up around it, darling, I need to work it out of you."

Will rolls his hips in desperate little thrusts, chasing the solid strength of Hannibal fucking him on the plug. "Liar. I know I opened myself up well enough," he pants, and Will smiles up at Hannibal leaning over him, eyes bright and wild. "You just want b-better *leverage,* oh, *God—"*

Hannibal ducks his head and snarls, pressing the edges of his teeth to the base of Will's sternum; scrapes them over the skin, then soothes it with a wet, sucking kiss. Pulls until the flare of the plug nearly slips out. Will can feel his rim stretched around it, still not as wide as Hannibal's cock, but the silicone is hard, unforgiving. There's very little flexibility to it, and so even its modest size feels like so much more.

Will writhes. Whines. Reaches up and claws at Hannibal's shoulders, at the loose top of his scrubs; *gasps* and finally kicks his legs up on either side of Hannibal's hips and pushes at the elastic waistband with the toes of the Louboutins. "Hannibal, *enough,"* Will hisses, "Come on, I want you inside me. Just—ah, *fuck.* Fuck me."

Hannibal moans against Will's belly, licks and kisses as he finally pulls the plug free and Will squirms beneath his weight, at the empty, open feeling, dripping—

"Please, please, please," Will gasps, and hooks his legs around Hannibal's waist, urges him on with his heels and can't even feel sympathy for how those stilettos must be digging in. "I've been thinking about this all day. Please."

Will arches and moans at the first wet touch of Hannibal's cock to his gaping hole, holding his underwear aside. That moan turns to silence when Hannibal forces his way in, slicking himself with the lube Will pushed into his own body in the college bathroom, enough that he'd be leaking if the plug hadn't kept him full, and Will *wants* to leak, wants to be dripping Hannibal's come—

"God, yes." Will tosses his head back and it thuds against the wood, paws gracelessly at Hannibal's chest as he bottoms out, as he fills Will up so good he can feel Hannibal's cock twitching somewhere deep inside below his belly button. Deep, gasping breaths that fill Will's lungs so much it forces all the space out of his body; forces even a little bit more when he pushes down on his own belly with one flattened palm, and draws some terrible, primal sound from Hannibal's lungs at the sight.

"You're insatiable," Hannibal says against his skin, and when he lifts his head enough to look up at Will through his lashes, his eyes glow red and black like hellfire. He draws his hips back, pulls inch by slick inch from the burning heat of Will's body. "How do your survive your evenings alone?"

Will clenches around the head of Hannibal's cock and stares at him in challenge, in furious want. "Unhappily," he snaps.

Hannibal worms his hand beneath Will's, but rather than letting himself be pushed aside, Will presses down harder, and as Hannibal slips slowly back into him—

Hannibal rumbles deep in his chest as he feels the sensation of Will's guts forced open to make room for him, carves himself a home within Will's body. Will rocks his hips helplessly, forces what little movement he can leverage himself with, sprawled as he is across Hannibal's office desk.

Will's eyes screw shut, but the fluorescent lights are bright behind his lids. He covers them with his forearm and arches up, blind and begging. "Please—"

His arm is pulled away from his eyes. Hannibal pins it above his head, against the desk, hard enough to hurt, and his teeth are bared. "Look at me while I fuck you, darling."

Will's lips part on a moan. He nods, nods, nods, and Hannibal fucks him just the way he likes. Holds him down fast and shoves inside faster, deeper, trapping Will within the endless black inkwells of his pupils, ravenous for every flicker of pleasure and desire on Will's face. Will hitches his legs up and his lashes flutter at the change in angle, as his head rolls back involuntarily as Hannibal's cock rubs up against that sparking spot inside Will's body, alight with sensation from near an hour of constant teasing. "Shit, Hannibal, *there."*

Hannibal braces both hands on either side of Will's head, rolls into Will again, again, and Will's mouth is open so wide, he can't help the sounds that spill from him, and—

Two fingers slide into his mouth. Will's eyes widen as Hannibal's flash, furiously aroused but amused in his indulgence. "Hush, Will," he growls, and his voice rasps. "The blood labs are just down the hall. You wouldn't want your friend to hear you."

Will keens around Hannibal's fingers because oh *fuck,* he didn't even *think,* he's just been riding this feeling and his own need but *oh*—

Will sucks at Hannibal's fingers, shoves his own hand between their stomachs, beneath the waistband of the panties to rub his palm over his cock, the lace stretched so tight he can't even fist himself properly, but this'll be enough, more than enough, shit, it's all so *much*—

Will's muscles tighten as the sensation crests, ricocheting up his spine and behind his eyes and through his cock in hot, wet pulses that ooze through the lace mesh and onto his own belly. His mouth is wet, so fucking wet around Hannibal's fingers; he licks at them gently, between them, savoring the taste of skin and ignoring the scent of antibacterial soap now washed away. Will blinks his eyes open when he feels Hannibal's lips touch his sternum, unaware that they had closed, but hastily takes advantage of his closeness to bring his clean hand to Hannibal's hair, stroke through the strands with the blunt edges of his fingernails, and he feels Hannibal's rhythm falter. Will's quickly becoming overstimulated but wouldn't trade this for the world; the weight of him, the scent, the feeling of being surrounded and eclipsed by something bigger than he is.

Bigger, but not more terrifying. Will can give as good as he gets.

He clenches up around Hannibal's cock, drags him close with his heels, and feels Hannibal's gasping breath against his skin, his clutching hand at Will's hip, his twitching orgasm deep within Will's body. God, he's strong; powerful in a way so few things are, and his love is just as fierce.

And his love is indulgent, to allow Will what he wants, whenever and *wherever* he wants it.

Will sighs his satisfaction, soiled hand pinned between their bellies. His feet cross behind Hannibal's ass, his free arm hooks around his neck, drags him close. Cradles him, pets him, and licks Hannibal's fingers clean when he pulls them from the cushion of Will's tongue.

He's in no hurry to remove himself. Instead, he presses his face to Will's smooth chest, over the band of lace, and rests his cheek against Will's thrumming heart. When Will lifts his head, Hannibal obliges him in his search for a kiss without hesitation, and it is as savoring and slow as it is thoroughly adoring.

With his arm around Hannibal's neck, he doesn't have much leverage but to curl his fingers and idly pet at his cheek, feel the roughness of where his stubble has grown in slightly—he clearly didn't shave before work this afternoon, and it makes Will smile.

And Will's smile makes Hannibal smile. "Hello, Will."

"Hi," Will murmurs against his mouth. "I missed you. And I said that already. Sorry for being a broken record."

"Don't apologize," Hannibal replies, and though the Ripper paces anxiously inside his eyes, the man who contains him is so blissfully satisfied that neither can find reason to complain. His smile widens, sharp and teasing. "I may have to turn the volume down from time to time, but I enjoy every sound you make."

Will laughs so hard it shakes them both. "Shut up, that was so bad."

Hannibal's eyes crinkle at the corners. Fuck, he's beautiful. "If you're going to accost me in my office during the work day, you'll have to tolerate my sense of humor at its least sophisticated."

Will skims the toe of his heels over Hannibal's bare back where the scrubs were rucked up. He smirks. "What do you think—broken in enough?"

Though his cock has gone soft, Hannibal rolls his hips. Nuzzles Will's cheek, and with a lascivious smile of his own, says, "I certainly hope not."

Hannibal kisses him goodbye in the halls of the ER, drawing idle whispers, but not much more. Will smiles against his lips and kisses him again, chaste pecks that fill his ribs with settled peace. "I'll see you tomorrow. Round four o'clock, four-thirty?"

"I'm looking forward to it, mylimasis." Hannibal kisses the apple of his cheek, pets over Will's tousled curls. He takes a step back, but his face is soft, open with warmth.

Will smiles; shifts on his heels and breaks their gaze. Swallows hard as the plug shifts inside him, the leather skirt rubbing against his bare ass and cock beneath it, and when he looks up, Hannibal's smile is knowing, his gaze heated. "Shut up," he huffs, and feels his cheeks flood with blood. The sensation prickles, almost itching. Will glances toward the door, and he sighs. "I love you."

"I love you, too. Drive safely."

"I will." Will hitches his bag up on his shoulder, his ruined panties and Louboutins tucked safely inside. His outfit is a mismatch of style and taste, fine designer clothing and old work boots. He notices Hannibal's eyes dart to them and growls, "Don't you dare."

Hannibal smiles. He turns away. "Goodnight, Will."

Will huffs as he retreats, dodging between patients and rolling beds, nurses and crash carts. But even before he hits the automated doors, he's smiling. He gets sidelong looks from those suffering emergencies, for often those leaving the ER are not prone to fits of joy, but there's very little that could quash his good mood.

And then he hits the outside, the darkness of the parking garage, swerving between shadows to get to the Volvo, when—

"I know what you're doing, Graham."

Will twitches hard, startled, and Wilhelmina rears her head. He spins and spies Freddie Lounds leaning against the back bumper of his car, all cool poise and cold blue eyes, only a shade darker in their hue than the glazed white of the dead.

Will bares his teeth. "You're not supposed to be on hospital property."

"So go get someone," Freddie sneers. "I'll be gone before you do. There's no cameras down here, I checked."

"This is fucking harassment, Freddie," Will snaps. He's discomfited as hell, but he doesn't want to show it; oddly vulnerable in the invisible state of undress, vulnerable when the plug in his ass is the only thing stopping Hannibal's come from leaking down his leg right now, and he would *really* rather

not deal with Freddie fucking Lounds, who isn't even supposed to be here. Will's hand dives into his pocket to search for his phone.

"Ah, ah, ah," Freddie says. "I wouldn't."

Will pauses, but only just.

And then he notices the camera she's holding idly in her lap. His eyes flicker to it. Back up to her. "The fuck's that?"

"Evidence," she murmurs. Her curls tremble, and Will can't tell if she's affected by the cold, or if she simply scents blood. But he's been careful. She can't have anything, or Crawford would have turned on Will in a heartbeat. She can't have anything that would cause him doubt. "Don't worry, I haven't shown anyone yet. But I know what you're doing."

Will smiles. Laughs incredulously. What kind of a fucking ploy. How could she have *any* idea? "Really? What am I doing?"

"I didn't steal those fucking notes. I didn't need a psychiatrist to tell me you were a nutcase, I already knew that." Freddie's eyes narrow. Her toe taps against the concrete, boots much more stylish, but just as worn as his. "But I think it's interesting that a professional saw it in you, too. And that Crawford so helpfully decided to overlook that diagnosis, and the fact that we both know damn well you're running *Abnormal Analysis."*

Will purses his lips. He barely avoids snarling. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Cut the shit, Graham. I'm not an idiot. It's barely even a secret anymore." Freddie flashes her teeth. She turns the camera in her hands. "You're helping the FBI. It's the only reason why Crawford wouldn't arrest you, too."

Cold climbs the ladder of Will's bones from the base of his spine, until it coalesces behind his eyes. Until he goes very, very still, and his voice very, very soft. "You better be careful with accusations like that, especially without proof. You'll get someone killed."

"See, the thing is," Freddie says brightly, and she sounds so much like Mason in this moment, Will can hardly help the awareness he has of his fingernails, his teeth, "Normally I would care about something like that. But if it's *you,* Graham, then I don't. Do you know why?"

"Enlighten me," Will snaps.

"Because a psychopath like you is not actually helping the FBI." Freddie smiles. It's the ugliest thing he's ever seen. "You're using them, just like you're using the nice doctor in there. You have him all wrapped up around your little finger, buying you nice things in exchange for you putting out, but the *second* he becomes inconvenient, you're gonna give him right to the Ripper. Hell, I wouldn't be surprised if you're steering Crawford in completely the wrong direction, making the best of a bad situation to score your murder husband a Get Out Of Jail Free card. They'll never catch the Chesapeake Ripper as long as you're on the case, because *you* don't want them to. You'll make a nice little nest egg on your ad money and run off into the sunset at first chance. And for all you like to get preachy and soapbox-y about how I'm gonna get people killed, that's not on me. That's on *you.* And you don't even have the capacity to care."

Everything that forms the entity of Will Graham and Wilhelmina is still and silent. He stares at Freddie, blazing with what she believes to be a triumph, her ace in the hole.

She's wrong about so many things. So many.

But, at heart, she's not wrong about him.

When Will smiles, Freddie's fades. Her eyes widen, sharpen with alarm. His nostrils flare as he inhales; there's the faintest tinge of sourness to the air, and though it's likely stale gasoline, he likes to imagine it might be fear.

"Freddie," Will says gently, and takes a step closer. She flattens her back against the Volvo, and realizes too late that she has boxed herself in. The only way out is through him. "Let me tell you something about everything you just said."

"Don't come any closer," she snaps, and oh, yes, *now* she's afraid.

She should be.

"And I'll start with the fact that you better hope you're *wrong* about everything you said, because if it were true, you'd be dead by the morning for showing me your hand. You think the world's gonna notice one undergrad gone missing?" Her pupils contract. "Jack Crawford would think you skipped town. You're a criminal, after all. Who'd believe the Ripper came after *you?* You didn't trust anyone enough to tell them your suspicions. I expect you thought I'd cower, or bend my head. Ask you what you want. But I don't give a shit what you want, because you have *nothing* on me. But I can tell you what—*if* you publish that the writer of *Abnormal Analysis* is working with the FBI, and if it were true, and you blew their cover, you'd be arrested. For good, this time. And they *would* die."

Will swallows hard. Hopes like hell that Hannibal would pause for long enough to believe him, but why would he? After all the time Will has spent lying, believing that Will doesn't know the truth, would he even pause in cutting ties, if it were to come down to a case of self-preservation?

"But if *they* disappear, Freddie, *everyone* will notice. Their readers will notice. The FBI will notice. But you know what the most dangerous thing of all would be, for you?"

Freddie stares at him. Will clenches his teeth until his jaw aches. His mouth knows the taste of blood, and he *wants* it.

"Whoever writes that website, the Chesapeake Ripper is in love with them. Whether or not you think that person's intentions are genuine, the phrase *shoot the messenger* exists for a reason. And I, personally, would *not* want to be the person responsible for breaking his heart."

Will watches the movement of her throat as she swallows. He cocks his head, and his rage is a cold, controlled thing.

"Get off of my car. Get off of the hospital property. If I see you following me, I *will* take Hannibal's advice and get a restraining order. I'm *sick* of this bullshit, I'm *done."* He takes a step back; turns, and holds his arm out in a broad, sweeping gesture, and extends one finger. "Go."

Freddie sneers as she passes him, but without the watchful eyes of witnesses upon them, Will notices, she is much more hesitant to lash out at him. Maybe she's afraid of what he'll do. In all honesty, Will's not so sure himself.

Wherever she goes, he doesn't care. But once she's out of sight, Will gets into his car. Shaken, he turns over the ignition. Locks the doors.

Will hasn't been afraid of Hannibal in a long time. He refuses to be now.

Freddie Lounds has no idea who she's dealing with. And when this is over, if he has to, he'll take care of her, too.

Fuck her.

Will bares his teeth and puts the car in reverse. When he gets home, he has a love letter to write.

Hannibal gets home late, some strange amalgam of weary and rejuvenated. Will's impromptu—well, he'll call it an ambush—admittedly caught him off guard.

He had hoped that another clue would finally, *finally* lead Will to the right conclusion, and yet, there has been nothing but silence for the last two days. Hannibal had given him distance under the pretense of Will's busy schedule, his encroaching finals. But he's been impatiently awaiting something, *anything.*

Now, it appears as though Will never got his message at all. And though Hannibal loves Will dearly, and what time they spent together this afternoon was deeply enjoyable, it was not the visit he was anticipating.

If Will didn't receive his gift, then where did it go? Surely if it were found by another, he'd have heard of it by now on the news. The thought of a perfectly healthy heart, wasted—

His tablet *pings,* and Hannibal's thoughts stop in their tracks when he sees the SMS subscription for *Abnormal Analysis.* He leaves his lunch dish to soak in the sink, carries the tablet to the study, and doesn't even bother to change into anything more comfortable than his scrubs.

This takes precedence.

Hannibal sits at his desk, turns the desk lamp on. He opens the web page and reads.

Stops. Stills.

> *I don't understand you.*
>
> *I don't get it. I just don't. You make such grand gestures, but then there's nothing but radio silence. I have nothing to go off of, no context for what you're thinking right now. What are you playing at? Where the hell are you?*
>
> *Maybe you've been on a business trip, or on a vacation with your wife. Maybe you've got a sick kid. What the hell would I know when you won't tell me anything about you?*
>
> *It's been weeks. I need more than what you're giving me if you actually give a damn about being understood. Maybe you don't.*
>
> *I can't tell if you're a coward or if you're just heartless.*

Hannibal's nostrils flare as he exhales, *hard.* Is Will *trying* to enrage the Ripper? Is that the consensus he reached when he changed his mind, chose Hannibal as a man, and chose to forsake the monster that worships him?

> *View Page Source*

And, yet.

Hannibal copies the hidden link. Pastes it into a new tab. Heartless, indeed.

> *Password: The Hanged Man*

Don't worry. I know there's no one else.

I'm sorry if I struck any nerves. I've been flooded with threats and accusations, and more than anything, I want to divert this page into positive public opinion. It'll draw eyes away from the nature of what I truly feel and the messages I'm hiding for you.

You've listened to me, you've been so patient with me. I'm getting closer every day, and I finally feel as though I'm on the right track. I know you've been watching. I know it's hard to wait for me to come to you, but I promise you, I'm coming.

The flowers were beautiful, and truly, very sweet. I should have realized before how an artist of your caliber would be capable of the romance you consistently show, and yet I'm humbled and touched by it every time; even more touched by the crown jewel of your gift.

I've learned recently how difficult collecting such a thing can be. Learned—or rather, realized—other things about them, too.

Thank you. I know it can't have been an easy decision to offer me something of such value, and though I hate the idea of taking away from you, I assure you, your gift did not go to waste. It has sustained me in my waiting, and hopefully that knowledge will help to sustain you in yours.

I want to offer you something worthy of your legacy, starving for it. I just need to figure out how, and what, and when, and where.

But I will. And then I'll find you.

Yours,

♥ *xo*

He stares at the words for a time, uncomprehending. Rereading.

Though I hate the idea of taking away from you—sustained me in my waiting—hopefully that knowledge will help sustain you—Yours, ♥ xo.

Hannibal inhales, unsteady. Sits back in his chair, and rubs one hand over his mouth. He can't ask. He knows he can't ask, because this is not anything he is supposed to know as Hannibal Lecter. But every time he thinks he knows Will Graham, Will becomes unknowable to him again.

Clearly, Will *did* receive his gift. As for what he did with it…

Learned—or rather, realized—other things about them, too.

Hannibal sets the tablet down. Involuntarily, his heartbeat speeds. What an astounding, ingenious, insightful, and completely *blind* creature.

Starving for it.

"What no one else has realized, and you don't even blink. But I stand before you, and you refuse to see," Hannibal murmurs; infinitely frustrated, deeply impressed. A truly awesome and confounding thing to behold, the mind of Will Graham. "Well done, my love."

Did not go to waste.

Hannibal closes the case cover with a *snap.* "Bon appétit."

3:12

Chapter Notes

> Sorry I didn't manage to get this out last week, I was having a bit of a time IRL. I should hopefully be replying to all you fantastic commenters and your well wishes soon!! You guys are seriously the best and I highkey love you. Here you go, and here you have it: Gala v2.0, pt. 1.

Saturday morning, Will packs a suitcase. Within it is enough clothing for the weekend, the full assortment of his makeup and brushes, and everything he'll need for school on Monday. His dress is already waiting at Hannibal's home, as well as half the clothing Hannibal bought him that night; he'll bring more next week after finals.

It's hard to deny that with his home closed down, the windows locked, his fridge cleaned out and nearly empty, every day feels less like Will lives here, and more like a place he stays in between going home to Hannibal. That feeling is even harder to ignore ever since Will packed up Winston and his belongings earlier this morning and drove him to his neighbor's farm several miles down the road, where he'll remain until the semester is well and truly over, and Will's winter break is winding down.

It feels empty here. And, in truth, Will has little to no desire to stay here by himself when the commute is just as far from Hannibal's home as it is from his own. It's probably too much to presume without asking, even though he's nearly certain Hannibal would welcome him, but…

He'll ask this weekend. Worst case scenario, he returns home during the early week; best, he'll stop back home on Monday and pack the rest of his things.

The thought lightens his steps, lightens his heart. Soon. Soon they'll be safe and the truth will be laid bare and everything will be okay. Hannibal will be his to keep.

The last thing Will does is take the cup of flowers from atop the old piano; they're wilting now, petals drying around the edges, but it doesn't feel right to throw them away. He drains the water into the sink, washes the cup idly and sets it in the strainer.

Then, a thought.

Will takes the roll of parchment paper from the drawer and cuts two small sheets from it; replaces it, then takes them and the flowers into the living room. There, he finds the hard-bound, heavy plant index and opens it to the page bearing *Dianthus Barbatus,* Sweet William. He places one sheet on either side of the open pages; gently places the cluster of fragile blooms atop the entry.

He closes the book. Sets it atop the back of the old, upright piano, and places another bunch of books on top. It looks deliberate, artful, and will act as a weight to keep the flowers pressed and flat.

It'll preserve the Ripper's gift to him. Preserve the memory of the heart he consumed and the noose he fed to the fire and burned to hide the evidence.

Will loads the back of his car with his suitcase and school bag; makes sure the barn is locked, the gun safe is secure, and everything is turned off, the heat turned down just enough so the pipes stay warm. He'll be back in a few days, and if all looks good, then it'll be some time before he comes back again.

Will stands in the front yard in the winter sun and looks at the little house, its small windows and steep roof, the cozy porch. It doesn't feel right to see it shut down, but this is a time of transformation, and that house is no longer space enough to hold him.

His eyes fix on the upstairs window, and Will swallows hard.

"Bye, Dad," he murmurs, and the wind steals the sound from the words, sweeps them out across the field like ashes and dust.

As a child chasing bugs through the grass and around the docks, he never thought to wonder whether it hurt when a butterfly emerged from its chrysalis. Now, he supposes, he doesn't have to wonder.

It *does* hurt—but by the time the caterpillar realizes what's happened, it's far too late to stop.

The life cycle of insects, and of murderers.

Will kisses Hannibal on the front steps, in full view of the road and his neighbors and anyone who might be watching. He doesn't care. Let them.

This man is his. This life is his. And he'll fight for it tooth and nail. To first blood. To death.

Will takes over the downstairs bathroom; it's the best he can manage while still giving Hannibal use of his space to get ready upstairs. It's fortunate the counter is broad enough to lay out all his products —primer, concealer, foundation, contour, highlight, in that order. Will shapes and softens his face, covers the fresh pink skin of his cheeks and neck, newly shaved, with pale foundation; blends tones and accentuates the angle of his cheekbones, and blends the barest tint of rose-toned blush. He shapes and fills and sets his brows with a pigmented pencil and scrubs it through, then sets them with clear gel.

Last time he attended an event with Hannibal, he was all sweet pinks and peaches; colors and styles that are as safe as they are conventional.

He's not that person anymore.

The dress is dramatic, and speaks on its own. He wouldn't want to overwhelm it; Will opts for oldschool Hollywood eye makeup with skin-toned shadows and shimmers, a nude ombre that he

accentuates with a black liquid eyeliner, wingtips sharp and symmetrical. Brushes his lower water line with white liner to brighten, then darkens beneath.

His mascara tonight is a new one that he'd first used just before that dinner not long ago—a fiber lash product that took some getting used to. Will swipes the mascara through his lashes, adds a layer of the fiber, and repeats. The effect is thickening, volumizing, and transforms his lashes from a deep brown to a true, high-contrast feathered black.

He curls them. Dusts the spare fibers away with a clean brush, then sits back. Reaches for his lip pencil, and outlines with a classic red, defining the curve of his lower, the sharp corners, the cupid's bow of his upper lip. Fills in the lines with a matte liquid lipstick that he knows, come hell or high water, will be there until he takes a micellar cleanser to it at the end of the night.

Will exhales. His shoulders relax.

When he lifts his eyes to take in the full effect, it is not himself the stares back.

She tilts her head. Reaches back to release the clip from her hair, and straightens her bangs with her red-clawed fingertips. Wilhelmina considers him as she did that night in the dream, an independent entity embodied in his reflection. Then she turns her attention, offhand, to the gown hung up on the back of the door. She smiles at him, and retreats to the place she lives in the back of his brain, in the pit of his belly, the set of his spine.

It's time.

Though good taste would say to wear stockings with a dress that slits so far up the thigh, he forgoes them. Instead, Will has wiggled his way into a pair of high-waisted nude shapewear briefs, his soft cock carefully tucked back, creating a smooth silhouette.

Will takes the gown down, unzips it. Steps in, and pulls it up, and notices the skirt just *slightly* shorter, though still too long without the added height of his heels. Will's toes curl against the tile, the nails, too, painted red.

He leaves the back of the dress undone; there's no point in struggling when Hannibal will be down any minute. In the meantime, Will loosely, casually French braids a portion of his hair, and secures it back with a twist and a bobby pin. He draws his locks away from the unmarred side of his neck, sweeps the rest of his conditioned curls into place to cover and conceal Hannibal's bite behind his ear —despite the fact that he dabbed his foundation over the scar in the process of donning his makeup.

That mark is for them. It's not for Hannibal's gossipy, high-society pet projects, or for the eyes of men like Mason Verger who would wildly misconstrue the nature of his and Hannibal's ownership of one another.

Will hears the sound of footsteps coming down the staircase; he huffs softly though his nose, and takes one last look at his reflection.

It *is* himself, and herself, together. Not two people, no; not dissociative, but cooperative.

And they look beautiful.

"Hannibal?" Will calls as he opens the bathroom door and steps into the hall.

"Yes, darling—"

Hannibal stops at the foot of the stairs in a deep red tuxedo with notched silk lapels, bow tie hanging open and untied beneath the starched white collar of his shirt. His hair is combed back, and his eyes are bright, burning. Slowly, the corners of his mouth tip upward in a smile.

Will, too, smiles. “Can you zip me up again, please?”

“Will, if it weren’t for the fact that you’ve already spent such time making yourself resplendent, I would hate nothing more.” His teeth flash, slightly crooked and so damn charming, sharp and white. “But, yes, I will.”

Will sighs, amused, and turns in place in the entryway. Hannibal’s knuckles brush his spine, and he shivers pleasantly at the sensation of the zipper being drawn up.

“And I thought seeing you in this dress the first time would prepare me for the second,” he murmurs against Will’s temple. “I was quite wrong.”

“Flatterer,” Will says softly in return. He leans back against Hannibal’s chest and tips his head back for one quick, soft kiss. “I like your tux.”

Hannibal’s eyes linger on Will’s mouth even after they draw apart; still silently wondering if he’s smudged Will’s lipstick, doubtlessly. But Will’s knowing grin seems to reassure him, and he’s met with a rueful smirk. “A bit simpler this time, I think. I wouldn’t want to outshine my date.”

“Don’t worry,” Will replies, smug. “You don’t. Not quite.”

Hannibal’s expression goes flat, but there’s a suspiciously bright gleam in his eyes. “Is that so?”

And then Will is shrieking with laughter as he’s made airborne, scooped up into Hannibal’s arms with shocking ease. Will clutches at his shoulders as he’s carried from the entryway, down the hall, into the study; Will shoots him a questioning glance as Hannibal sets him down, then offers his hand. Will, obediently, sits, though cocks his head and stares up with new suspicion—

—and takes note of the broad, flat square in Hannibal’s pants pocket.

Will sighs, aggrieved, but his heart throbs with affection. “I told you not to.”

Hannibal takes the box from his pocket; undoes the button of his tuxedo jacket, and sits. It’s flatter than a ring box would be, felted gray velvet. The kind of thing that screams of expense, of excess, like everything *else* Hannibal gives him.

“In my defense, you most certainly did not. I simply asked you whether you preferred white or yellow gold, and you refused to answer.”

“That does *not* mean choose anyway,” Will scolds.

“That’s the risk you run when you refuse to indulge me, mylimasis.” His eyes positively shine, and *oh,* those are the words of the Ripper, right there. Will can feel the flustered heat rising in his cheeks. He wants to see. He doesn’t want to see. Hannibal cocks his head. He smiles. “May I show you?”

Just to spite Hannibal, one of these times he’s going to say *no.* Will swallows and mutters, “Yes.”

Will wishes his taste weren’t so fantastic.

The posts extend from the backs of two raindrop-shaped rubies, pointed downward; each is surrounded by small clusters of pear and marquise-cut diamonds, the points creating an organic drop effect that is not unlike fluttering leaves. They trickle downward, perhaps two inches in length, symmetrical to a fault and interspersed with smaller dazzling clear and rich red stones that drip like beads of blood. The overall look is both modern and classic, and the white gold settings disappear into the shimmer of brilliant gems.

“Hannibal,” Will whispers, and his eyes lift and catch; Hannibal looks at him expectantly. “You’ve really gotta start saving these things for special occasions or you’re gonna go bankrupt.”

He stares at Will, visibly amused. “My assets are not at risk, I assure you.” He tips his head to the other side; assessing, almost puppy-like. “Do you like them?”

Will stares back, incredulous—but in Hannibal’s gaze, he sees real curiosity, true desire to please. And Will’s helpless to that sort of thing, really. He reaches for Hannibal, curls one hand gently around his jaw. Draws him in. Kisses him gently, mindful of his makeup, but lingers long enough that Hannibal knows he means it. He means this.

“They’re ridiculously gorgeous. Like… really, obscenely, over-the-top beautiful.” Will’s breath catches in his throat when Hannibal’s concern melts away, when his face lights with a smile that crinkles his eyes at the corners. “Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome, darling.” Hannibal turns into the caress of Will’s hand against his cheek and kisses his palm. “Shall I assist in putting them on?”

Oh, this man.

Will tips his head to the side and makes a quiet, contented noise when Hannibal’s knuckles brush his neck and thumbs over the soft lobe of his ear. “Yes, please.”

The posts slip through his flesh. The backs lock. The earrings dangle and brush the sides of Will’s throat when he moves his head, and he feels… opulent. Regal.

“I know I throw a fuss when you give me things,” Will murmurs, catching Hannibal’s hand as it falls away. He draws it to his chest, and holds it against the sheer paneling and red lace over his heart. “Because of the money, and whatever else. But I want you to know I appreciate them. And I appreciate you thinking of me. And I like the fact that when we’re there tonight, anyone who sees us is gonna know I’m with you, and that I’m yours.”

“I know you appreciate the things I give you, Will.” Hannibal tilts his head, catches his eyes. “You never take them for granted. You treat the things I give you with care. I know your protests are because you’re not used to anyone else taking care of you. And I appreciate that you allow me to do so.” He smiles, a slight little thing, leans his head in like it’s a secret, conspiratory, between them. “But, selfishly, I also enjoy when others can tell at a glance that we’re together. I don’t want anyone to mistake my regard for you. I’m not the kind of man to give my attention lightly. My heart, not at all.”

Hannibal’s hand curls until just his fingertips touch Will’s chest. They linger, like at any moment, he may reach through Will’s ribs in search of *his* heart. To hold it, beating, bleeding, in his palm—fair payment and recompense for all the things Will’s made him feel these last few months. Perhaps to inspect it, and search for the answers to the questions that even now lie waiting in his eyes.

Tell me, Will silently pleads.

Hannibal's touch falls away.

Just say it, Hannibal.

And then, like clouds parting, like a wave breaking, he sighs. Stands, and extends his hand with a wry quirk of a smile. "We should be going. We wouldn't want to be late."

He pulls Will to his feet; brushes Will's bangs from his face, and his eyes are dark and intent. The Ripper is close to the surface tonight, a curious carnivore in the water nibbling about the lure.

Take the bait, Will wants to say. *Hannibal, just* ***tell*** *me.*

"Since I have the opportunity to ask, would you prefer the same as last time?" Hannibal asks. "Where we defaulted to nonbinary pronouns?"

The moment passes, and Will exhales. He looks up. Smiles, and squeezes Hannibal's hand. It draws a smile from him in return, and the tension fades. "Yeah, I think that worked well."

As Hannibal takes a step, leads him from this safe place, their sanctuary, Will goes. But he stops, just inside the threshold, even when Hannibal continues, and their grip breaks; when Hannibal turns back with a questioning glance.

"And," Will says, and swallows. Lifts his chin, and takes a breath, and embraces the solid confidence that waits within him. Straightens his shoulders, and assumes peace, assumes calm. He will be those things, and Hannibal will echo him, and this night will go exactly as Will's planned. "You can call me Willa, sometimes, if you want to."

Hannibal stares at him. Considers him. He steps forward, meets Will just on the other side of the threshold, as close as they can be without crossing that last line. "Is that something you want?" He asks, "Or is it something you think I should do for the sake of how you're perceived by my colleagues?"

A month ago, he might've answered differently, reacted differently. But now, Will smiles. "I don't give a damn about your colleagues. I know you don't, either." Will reaches for Hannibal; his manicured fingers find the unfastened bow tie. Will's eyes narrow as he pictures doing this in reverse, and somewhat clumsily manages to tie it; laughs at himself when he's done. "But I'm not just one thing, right? Neither and both."

Hannibal's eyes sharpen, intent on Will's expression, but mindful of his hands. "If it would make you happy, my love, then I will refer to you however you wish."

Will looks up at him with a crooked, off-kilter smile. "It won't be always. There'll be times when it won't fit me right, there'll be times when it will. But you know me better than anyone. I trust you to know those times."

"Then you place a great deal of faith in me."

At that, Will's smile fades. A crinkle forms in Hannibal's brow, perhaps wondering what he's said wrong, but he hasn't said anything wrong.

Will straightens his bow tie. Smooths his hands over the silk lapels. Leans up on his toes, and touches his lips to Hannibal's cheek. Inhales the scent of his lemongrass shampoo, of his mild, woodsy aftershave. He smells like everything Will has come to know to be *home.* "I have huge faith in you, Hannibal. I always have."

He brushes Will's bangs from his face, tucks a wayward curl behind his ear. Slips his index finger below Will's chin, and Will obligingly bares himself to Hannibal's starving gaze. It lingers on his throat, on the earrings. On Will's face. His eyes.

"We're going to be late," Will murmurs with a smile.

Hannibal leans down, their lips only a breath apart—"I can think of worse things."

The Lord Baltimore hotel is the traditional venue for Johns Hopkins' annual fundraisers. It is, perhaps, not quite the same timeless aesthetic as the Symphony Gala, but Johns Hopkins is certainly no slouch when it comes to an event. Warm gray and soft white walls, golden lights, glittering chandeliers. The room is wide open in the center for mingling, and twin short staircases on either side lead to a U-shaped upper level where tables are set. At the end of the room is a string quartet playing softly, and enormous windows overlooking the bay, not so far from the restaurant he brought Will to not so very long ago.

The event is in full swing by the time the car is parked and their coats checked. Hannibal's hand sits comfortably on Will's lower back as they enter, the paneling thin enough that he can feel the warmth of his skin, the flex of his spine. No one thinks to ask Will his age when it comes to the champagne; he hides a smile behind his glass and shares an amused glance with Hannibal.

He is lovely, outshining every other dull creature here. "Shall we?"

Will levels him with a sharp grin that's decidedly smartass in nature; leans into Hannibal's side and purrs, "Lead the way, Doctor."

Hannibal presses his lips together to contain his amusement, but he sets his hand at Will's waist, and he does.

Will's dress draws attention; wide eyes and double-takes, whispers that carry. They come from the wives of other doctors, some of the head nurses who have heard the rumors of his attachment, but have not yet met Will in person. Perhaps it shouldn't be surprising, for Hannibal preemptively built his own reputation for being respectable and well-liked, but solitary by nature. It comes as a pleasant surprise to those who know him that he is now proven to have a successful relationship, a loving attachment. It is settling for them to know he is capable of the love they are capable of, much the way that no one *ever* suspects a family man of being capable of terrible things.

Many of those in attendance tonight were there at the Symphony Gala; Hannibal chats idly, reintroduces Will to those who he recalls they have met before. Will takes this in stride, comfortably sipping champagne and listening to their stories with what appears to be rapt interest. He's an instant success, both beautiful and likable. As a chameleon does, he shifts from group to group; exchanges witty retorts with those who think themselves enough to match minds, offers compliments to those who need their egos attended to. He does so without direction, head tilted, silently reading the flashes he reads from Hannibal's face before the light catches another of his many facets, and like the gems he wears, Will glitters.

Hannibal spies the Emergency Department administrator growing near and exhales gently through his nose; the man is underwhelming as a person, but runs an effective unit, and as an emergency surgeon

within his employ, Hannibal is bid to make his greetings. The man's tuxedo is just slightly too small around his portly stature, hairline receding. He could certainly use someone to better dress him for his status. "Ah, Mr. Merle."

"Doctor Lecter!" The man exclaims with a smile, "Very good to see you here, very good. And—" He blinks in surprise as Will turns his attention from the wife of one of the other surgeons, and daintily slips his hand into the crook of Hannibal's arm. Hannibal's nostrils flare; he can feel his focus sharpen to a point as the man is taken off-guard and searches for a reaction.

Will beats him to it. He smiles and glances up at Hannibal; takes his hand back and shifts his champagne glass to it. Will reaches first, voice soft and high. "Willa. I'm here with Hannibal."

Merle *beams* as he shakes Will's hand, and Hannibal's shoulders relax. *"Very* nice to meet you. My apologies, I've never known Doctor Lecter to be accompanied to these events, let alone by someone so lovely."

Will's eyes squint with his smile; he radiates pleasure, amusement. He delicately adjusts the folds of his skirt as he reclaims his hand, and Hannibal recalls clearly how the man's palms have been unpleasantly damp. But Will is subtle, and Hannibal huffs, and allows it to take the tone of self-deprecating rather than blatantly entertained. "I'm afraid they're a force of nature not easily ignored. Willa, Mr. Merle is the head of the Emergency Department."

And *that* Will seems to find terribly amusing. "Then I guess I have to thank you." At Merle's surprised expression, Will glances up at him. "I met Hannibal in the ER."

"Oh! Well I do hope everything's alright."

"Nothing a little fiberglass and time can't fix," Will replies with a sweet smile. "And steady hands."

"Doctor Lecter is one of the department's finest surgeons," Merle says with a decisive nod. "We're very lucky to have him with us. Sad to see him go."

"I'm afraid I must follow the demands of my heart and mind," Hannibal replies evenly. Looks, sidelong, at Will. "And psychiatry seems to have more forgiving hours."

Merle nods sagely. "Understandable, understandable. Medicine is what keeps us whole, but family is keeps us sane."

"That's very wise," Will says, and Merle beams.

"Well, it's been a delight to meet you, but I must find my wife. Doctor Lecter, I'll see you at work."

"Very nice to meet you," Will says, and Hannibal nods as the man bustles off into the crowd. When he's disappeared, Will's smile grows. "Well. Now that I've met your boss…" Hannibal scoffs quietly. He takes a sip of his champagne, and Will radiates warm humor. "It's been enough time that Margot should be here somewhere. Do you mind if I take a quick look around?"

"Not at all. Would you like me to come with you?"

"Mm," Will says, and sips down the rest of his glass of champagne; plucks Hannibal's, near-empty, from his fingers. He grins. "I think I can handle myself. Try not to confess your love too loud when I get back this time, okay?"

A bark of laughter bursts from his ribs. Of course Will would make a joke of such a thing now that it's over and done. "At this point, I should hope it's no longer a confession as much as a statement of fact."

Will brushes by him, shoulder to shoulder, and leans over to murmur close to Hannibal's ear, "Oh, it's fact." Kisses his temple, chaste and quick, and spins out of the reach of Hannibal's reaching hands with an elated smile. "I'll be right back. Go find your friends, do your important doctor stuff."

Will's exuberance draws the eyes of his curious coworkers, who whisper when Hannibal sighs, when he smiles. "As you command."

Will winks as he retreats into the crowd, and Hannibal loses him to a sea of colors. Well, if all else fails, he can always ascend to the higher level to search him out again.

A group of familiar faces spies him; one of them waves him over, and he goes. "Hannibal! Was that your mystery girlfriend?"

How to answer that, he wonders? Sometimes yes. Sometimes no. But always his.

"When Willa's mood suits," he demurs, and in their ignorance, they laugh.

She slips him a round, acrylic compact case, perhaps an inch diameter. There's not many strands inside, but it won't take many; just one short, brown hair would do the trick, and Will exhales with relief. Shielded as they are within the ladies restroom, Will has no compunctions about hitching up the short lining of his skirt and slipping the case under the spandex shapewear that's tight around his belly. It won't be going anywhere, and padded against his soft flesh and concealed by the dress when he lowers it again, it doesn't show.

"Thank you," Will says softly, and Margot smiles wryly. "I love that dress."

Her smile widens. "Thanks. I thought it was weird, and Mason said I looked like a game of Tetris, so I had to have it." A classic ball gown silhouette in stone-colored, iridescent silk; geometric shapes and semi-precious stones are embroidered into the bodice and skirt in raised patches of goldish-bronze thread. A wave of fabric extends upward from her bosom to the shoulder, but attaches nowhere, held up simply by the weight of the material. The skirt becomes sheer as it falls to her ankles, gently see-through. Margot has wrapped her splint in a length of the same silk, tucked into the ends, and secured with a square blue clasp that looks almost like a cufflink. She wiggles her arm and it stays put. "I've actually gotten compliments on my arm. People are weird."

"What did you tell them?" Will asks.

"Schatzi bucked me off on the cross-country trail." She shrugs, and shakes her head; her hair, loosely braided down her back, sways in waves of auburn brown. She looks beautiful, bangs loose around her face, with matte nude lipstick and a rich slate cream eyeliner. She could have emerged a queen from a quarry of riches, and Will would have believed anyone who said so.

Her eyes, though, linger on him. "You look happy."

Will blinks. Quirks a small, faint smile, but feels the pull between his brows. He senses a *but.* “I am happy.”

Margot leads the way, and Will falls in at her side as they exit the restroom, and emerge to the second level. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

They come to the balcony at the very edge; look down upon the crowd in formalwear, tuxes of black and blue, gowns in every color. None, he realizes, quite like his. He looks for Hannibal among the masses. “I think want is irrelevant at this point,” Will admits. Inhales through his nose, and exhales slowly from the base of his lungs, emptying his chest. “Where was Mason when you left him?”

“Our table’s up on the other side. Daddy’s got him on a tight leash, but there’s a lot of important people to talk to. He’s trying for a merger with Tyson right now, and their CFO is here because his daughter has leukemia and Hopkins has the best children’s hospital around. He’s on it, he wants Mason in on it, but sent me away because *meat packing is men’s work.”*

Will snorts, and his eyes slip to her beside him: jaw set tight, brow crinkled with derision and consternation, and if knowing Margot Verger has taught him anything, it’s that anyone is capable of learning *anything* under pressure, up to and including how to kill and how to survive.

It’s to their good fortune that Molson Verger isn’t so wise.

“I’ll need to get him downstairs,” Will says softly. “Away from your dad. Not now. But later.”

“After dinner.” Margot nods. “They drink after negotiations, not before.”

“If he sees me, will he approach me?”

Margot is silent. Will turns to look at her, and her face is drawn, expression tight. “No,” she finally grits out, “Not unless I’m with you. And he’ll come for me, to antagonize you.” Margot swallows. “But you don’t want to fight with him. That’s…” She doesn’t say *motive,* but Will hears it. “...a bad look.”

“I know,” Will replies, perfectly even, perfectly serene. “But I don’t have to fight him. I just need him to *want* to fight.”

“Well, Mason when he drinks is somehow even worse than Mason when he’s sober,” Margot mutters. “So if you want a fight, you’ll get one.”

Will spies a group toward the window, familiar shapes and features—Hannibal seems to have found Eloise Komeda and Bella Crawford, and a sharp shape in a black tux: Abel Gideon seems to have found Hannibal in turn, likely in his search for Will. Where one of them goes, the other is surely not far behind, and Abel knows that well. Will exhales and turns away from the balcony; If he looks for too long, Hannibal will sense him, and he’s not quite ready to return yet.

If Bella’s here, then Jack must be around somewhere.

Will smiles. “Perfect.”

Will meets eyes with Margot and nods once; she nods in return and dutifully turns her gaze to the crowd as Will approaches Jack Crawford and snags him by the sleeve outside the men's restroom.

"I need a minute," Will says quietly, urgently.

Jack stares at him for a moment before what he's seeing catches up to his brain. "Will?"

"Come on," Will insists, and tugs him away. Margot trails along behind, a silent shadow, but keeps them in her eyesight as Will draws Jack beneath one of the raised levels, off against the wall. They should be far enough from where Will last saw Hannibal and Gideon that they'll be out of sight.

"I saw your post-it note to the Ripper," Jack says with a snide huff. "I thought you said you'd clear everything with me. We needed to draw him out, not push him away."

"Jack, we don't have time. I needed to piss him off to make sure he'd actually be here tonight."

Jack shuts up; his eyes widen, his chest puffs up, not unlike a bulldog. "Here?"

"Yes, *here.* You think he's going to just sit back and let me call him out for being an inattentive lover and a coward and then leave me on my own? I definitely struck a nerve. He's gonna want to see me. He's here, I guarantee you."

Crawford blinks, face twisting at the word *lover*. "You said you couldn't be sure without evidence."

"As soon as I started looking, I started to find it."

A vein twitches in Jack's temple; the air around him buzzes with his agitation. "You were supposed to come to *me.* You're a civilian, a student! You don't have the experience to decide these kinds of things. That's not up to you."

"Then screw my instincts! Screw what I know. You make the call," Will snaps. He sets his jaw. *"You* brought me in because you wanted me to look, I'm just telling you what I've seen. I'll let you confirm it. All I ask is you keep an eye out, and if you see the same signs I do—"

"Then I need you to tell me, Will." Will inhales, a shuddering breath. Smothers his anger until it smolders beneath his skin like coals, and he ducks his head like a scolded child. "Who is it?"

Will widens his eyes. Presses his lips together and looks away, a nervous gesture that he's seen Margot do a hundred times. Scans the crowd with the vigilance of one expecting to be hunted, and subtly touches the place where the vial is tucked against his skin, safely out of sight.

"Will. *Who?"*

Will lets out a quiet sound, rife with manufactured fear and despair. "Abel Gideon."

Jack's nostrils flare. There's a spark in his eyes, a thought in his mind taking root. "He was the one making wise cracks after the briefing at the hospital." A chuff of breath. "Are you sure?"

Will nods. "He's the one who set my broken arm. He asked me what I was studying at school, and I told him about my project on the Ripper—" He stops. Lurches gently, like someone about to cry. "Right before Caldwell was killed. And I wrote that article, and then the Press Club…. He was at the Symphony Gala. I thought I saw it then, when he followed me to the bar. He saw me argue with Mason Verger—and right after that, the next murder looked like me. Was supposed to be *freeing* me."

Will swallows, picks at one of his press-on nails. “He has medical knowledge. And a temper, and a bad marriage with no kids. And he is *smart.* Smart enough to be one of the top surgeons at Johns Hopkins. I’ve talked to some of the nurses when I was waiting for Hannibal the other day—they all like him, but when I asked, no one could really tell me anything about him.”

He licks his lips. A side-effect of the stress of pretending, he shakes. “It just… adds up, Jack. And normally I would take my time, come to you, like I said I would. We could be smart about this over weeks or months or whatever it takes. But when I went to find Margot, and I looked down over the balcony to look for Hannibal… Gideon’s with him right now.”

Jack looks alarmed by this. Will reaches for him, snares his fingers in the sleeve of Jack’s navy tux with a quiet, broken noise.

“I know it’s not a lot, but I have a gut feeling. I need you to believe me so we can get ahead of this before Hannibal gets hurt. Just… look out for us tonight, please. And if you see what I do by the end, then I’ll take the next step and we’ll get him.”

Crawford takes a deep, steadying breath. “If what you say is true, you should be in protective custody.”

“No, he won’t act now,” Will says softly. His grip weakens, falls away. “Going after someone he works with is too obvious, especially after he knows the FBI have already been in the building investigating a data breach relating to his own crime. And his ego is more important. There’s no victory in killing Hannibal compared to if he thinks he can win me away from him, instead.”

“And can he?” Jack asks darkly. “Win you?”

Abel Gideon? Will snaps his teeth at the thought. “I turned to the Ripper when I had nothing and no one, and he never noticed. But now I have someone. And there’s not a thing in this world that could take Hannibal away from me.”

Jack nods once, decisive. Will echoes him.

“Then I’ll keep my eyes out,” Crawford agrees. “And if I see what you see—”

“I’ll get him close. Lower the bait.”

Jack snags a passing waiter; takes one flute of champagne, and raises a brow, but says nothing when Will snags two for himself. When the man ambles off, he raises the glass in solemn salute. “You hook him, I’ll land him.”

Will hides his smile behind the rim of a champagne flute. “I’ll drink to that.”

He’ll admit he’s feeling bold when it comes time to head back. Maybe it’s a bad choice, but it’s a fun one at the time, and that’s why Will returns to Hannibal at the side of Jack Crawford while Margot searches out her elusive girlfriend.

Hannibal’s expression is pleasant but polite, noticing Jack first as he approaches because of his superior height—but his eyes sharpen immediately to see Will with him; the muted, blunted edge of a

knife. Inside Will's chest, Wilhelmina flexes her claws.

"There they are," Eloise Komeda proclaims with a bright, toothy smile as they approach. Her gown tonight is reminiscent of a 1920s flapper, all metallic tones and tassels and intricate beading. "Agent Crawford, welcome. Will, so nice to see you again. You look absolutely beautiful."

Will ducks his head with a smile, the pretty arm candy of a powerful man. Well-mannered, proper. He deliberately avoids Abel Gideon's gaze. "Thank you, Mrs. Komeda."

"I see you found my husband." Bella says warmly, and holds out her hand; Jack goes to her immediately. Will finds his place at Hannibal's side without prompting. Jack and Bella, too, have coordinated in shades of blue. With good humor, she says, "Thank you for returning him."

"My pleasure."

Gideon flashes a grin, but keeps his voice polite when he says, "Will, you're looking well."

Will's smile is carefully constructed, neither too welcoming nor too polite. Friendly acquaintances. He'll have to play his part here very, very carefully. "Likewise, Doctor Gideon."

Hannibal's attention slips from Gideon to Will, his voice perfectly casual. Fake. "Where is Margot?"

"Looking for Alana," Will replies, and hands over the champagne flute. He returns his focus to Jack, and meets his weighted glance. Quirks his lips and lets it fade, a nervous little thing. "I was lucky enough to find Agent Crawford instead. He wanted to check up on me."

"Oh?" Eloise asks before Hannibal can, itching for drama. She seems the sort of woman to flourish on as much information as she can collect at any given time. The FBI's involvement with Doctor Lecter's new paramour is certainly gossip-worthy, if the details are good enough. "No trouble, I hope?"

Will shifts in place. He doesn't hide, but neither does he stand tall when he replies, "He's been, uh, assisting me with a very persistent stalker."

Shocked silence—Bella makes a little *oh* of surprise and sympathy, and Eloise quite looks like perhaps she regrets bringing it up. Hannibal's knuckles go white around the stem of the champagne flute. The lines around his eyes are tight. His smile is gone. The thing that lives inside him is stunned to silence, stillness, and all around him is void. It screams danger in a way that anger never could. "What?"

Jack, too, looks alarmed at *that* particular revelation. Abel's grin dims. The wide eyes of all their associates focus on Will, and he is the star on center stage, thriving. He will be certain to act the part. Will squirms; he purses his painted lips, averts his eyes with fluttering lashes. "Well, you know," he murmurs to Hannibal, but loud enough for everyone to hear. "About my… classmate."

It's nearly a tangible feeling, that realization, that relief. Will glances up, a nervous gesture, and absorbs the moment that understanding blooms across Hannibal's face. The minute tension in his spine relaxes. His expression doesn't lose its concerned edge, but it softens. "Again? Why didn't you mention it?"

Will shrugs awkwardly, angling himself closer to Hannibal's side. "Ongoing investigation," he replies, like that should explain everything. In a way, it does.

Eloise, for her part, looks terribly interested. “I wasn’t aware the FBI involved themselves in college matters.”

“If it were a college matter, I wouldn’t be. But it’s become a legal matter,” Jack replies, looking some tumultuous amalgam of irritated at Will’s mention of Freddie Lounds, and relieved that Will is not foolish enough to mention the Ripper. He purses his lips. “I’m afraid I can’t discuss the details.”

“It’s taken care of, that’s all I care about,” Will replies, brightening with feigned relief. “Agent Crawford has been a huge help.”

Bella looks pleased; her hand tightens around Jack’s. Will wonders if it’s only the demands of their careers that have prevented them from having children.

“All part of the job,” Jack says, acknowledging with a nod, softened by his wife’s approval, but undoubtedly finalizing the subject.

“Well, I’m glad it won’t be an issue. It’s just about time for finals, is it not?” Mrs. Komeda asks.

“Starting Monday.” Will nods. He sways gently where he stands, bumping his hip against Hannibal’s, and meets the curious glance with a smile. “And I think I’ve got enough distractions.”

Though Hannibal’s gaze lingers heavy and considering on him, that seems to break him of his somber demeanor. Whatever doubts or concerns plague his brilliant mind are forced away under the weight of Will’s sunnier disposition, and Jack’s complete and total lack of suspicion. Why would he suspect, after all? He knows the lion is in the room, he’s simply facing the wrong direction. Hannibal sighs. Smiles, rueful. “We happen to be one another’s greatest obstacle on the road to higher education.”

“Imagine that.” Will shifts his champagne glass so he can tangle their fingers loosely.

“Well, you’ll have to find time to stop distracting one another so you don’t deprive the world of your insights,” Eloise scolds fondly, and Will recalls her position as a professor and lecturer.

He bites back a quiet snort, hides it behind a sip of champagne that fizzes within his ribs. Deprive the world of his insights? What a thought. Will’s voice is droll and flat when he says, “I’d have to have worthwhile insights to offer first.”

“Give yourself more credit,” Abel replies, as the attention of their group shifts to him, Will is so sweetly vindicated. He doesn’t even have to dig the hole. All he has to do is stand still and present, and Abel will provide every bit of circumstantial evidence he needs. “You’re capable. Sharp mind. You see plenty. That’s gotta come hand in hand with observations worth their weight in gold.”

It’s a nice sentiment. One that Will agrees with wholeheartedly, and Eloise makes a sound of assent. Will takes a drink from his glass; his head is fuzzy, though not enough to impair his judgement, but it warms his cheeks. He would be a liar to say it’s not strategic. “Thank you,” he says quietly. Abel will read it as sincere flattery. Jack, as reluctant embarrassment. And Hannibal—

His hand disengages from Will’s, and he notes the absence of warmth and weight at once. Will bites back his sound of loss, which is swiftly silenced by the sensation of an arm slipping around his waist, a palm resting on his hip. Hannibal’s face is mild, his grip is light, but there is something in the subtle flex of his fingers that is howling possession.

“Of course,” Gideon says, and in Will’s peripheral vision, he could swear he sees blackened claws.

Hannibal sips his flute of champagne. The corner of his mouth twitches toward a snarl that he hides admirably well from all but Will, but fades altogether when Will, too, puts his arm around him. His manicured index finger threads through Hannibal's belt loop like fishing line through the eye of a hook; suture thread through a surgical needle.

Will looks up at him. He knows the adoration is blatant on his face. He makes no attempt to hide it, for *seeing* it always makes Hannibal relax a measure further, to know that Will is happily his. Always, always his.

"I agree completely. Will's mind is unparalleled." Hannibal says, and Will smiles. "Darling, dinner should be starting momentarily. Shall we collect the rest of our entourage and move upstairs?"

"Gladly," Will murmurs, and tips his head up to press a kiss to Hannibal's cheek. The red of his mouth leaves no claiming lip print behind, but it doesn't have to. He flashes Hannibal a cheeky grin. "Save me a seat at the fun table, won't you?"

Hannibal huffs through his nose. He smiles, and it's genuine. "I'm quite sure the fun won't arrive until you return."

"I'm counting on it." Will's smile widens, turns wolfish. He extracts his fingers from Hannibal's belt loop; lightly squeezes Hannibal's ass as he retreats. Will misses whatever expression passes his face, but Mrs. Komeda erupts in scandalized, wildly entertained laughter.

"Oh, Hannibal," she says, "You simply must bring Will around more often."

"As often as I am able," he replies, and as Will slips into the crowd with his head held high, utterly unashamed.

It seems Will's time of being overly-concerned with the decorum of their events has transitioned back to casual disregard, much to the bemusement of Hannibal's fellows. After all, it is not the actions of a high-bred lady that borrows a chair from a neighboring table when a formal fundraiser's setup doesn't accommodate their needs. However, Will does so with a straight back and set shoulders, careless of his gown as he carries it over, primly placing it between Alana and himself with the calm declaration, "Margot will be joining us tonight," and that is that.

Will sits to Hannibal's right, followed by Margot, Alana, Bedelia, and Eloise; Annalise Gideon sits beside her, and then Abel, Jack, and Bella at Hannibal's side. It is, perhaps, slightly more cozy a seating arrangement than Hannibal is used to, but the amount of room between them all is still reasonable enough. Hannibal acknowledges the unconventional setup with mild humor and says, "All the better for us to get to know one another," and Will smiles.

The food is acceptable; blended soup made from sweet squash, a bright and citrusy salmon, and vegetables shaved into cold salad of ribbons with a balsamic dressing. The theory is there, but the execution of the catering staff is… decidedly mass-produced, each dish not given the individual attention good food deserves. A shame; he'll have to speak to the event planner about higher-quality caterers in the future.

However, none of the others seem to be bothered, minus Margot who picks dispassionately at the fish. He likes her better for it immediately. The fish is, indeed, rather dry. But he isn't going to mention the quality, for it would be egotistical to prefer his own cooking to the work of so-called trained professionals, but—

"Hannibal," Eloise sighs, "If you're going to take your considerable talents away from surgery, the very least you could do to maintain your public service is open a restaurant and cater the rest of the hospital's events."

At his side, Will hides a snort behind a sip of champagne, pink cheeked and bubbly as the effervescence, more likely in good spirits than intoxicated. Hannibal, too, is amused.

Annalise tilts her head and glances between Mrs. Komeda and Hannibal. "Do you cook, Doctor Lecter?" Hannibal inclines his head, an acknowledgement. She shoots her husband a sharp glance. "That's impressive, considering your hours. I do all the cooking in our house."

"Anna," Gideon whispers through gritted, grinning teeth.

"Oh, dear, you don't even know!" Eloise proclaims, deliberately ignoring the scene they create. She has always been good at smoothing over the social ineptitude of those around her. "Hannibal is an excellent chef. He used to throw the most wonderful dinner parties."

Hannibal raises his brows. She lifts her glass and swirls the liquid within it; pins Hannibal with a shrewd look. She has never been afraid to challenge him. It's one of the things he enjoys about her, and in this moment, he can't summon anything other than good humor at her heavy-handed barb when his annoyance has a much better target.

"You heard me," she says. *"Used* to."

Will's eyes squint with the brightness of his smile. He's comfortable in his seat, his eyes heavy on Hannibal's face. In them, there is a glimmer of intrigue, and when his voice comes, it's the very same tone that is overly-innocent and often means trouble in some way or form. "Did he?"

"Oh, yes. Dinner and the show. Have you seen him cook? It's an entire performance." She shakes her head, amazed. Hannibal's lips twitch toward a smile, if only to see Will's interest as he sits up straight.

"I have." Will tilts his head, considering. He blinks, a flutter of long lashes as he considers Hannibal. "You haven't done anything like that since we met."

"I will again, once inspiration strikes," Hannibal replies. He reaches for Will's hand, lies his own atop it. Thinks idly of his rolodex, of a slew of impolite, unsubtle swine when he warmly adds, "I cannot force a feast. A feast must present itself."

"It's a dinner party, not a unicorn," Eloise retorts with an exasperated huff.

"But the feast is life," Hannibal counters pleasantly, "You put the life in your belly and you live."

Bedelia hides a smile with her glass. Bella, too, shares a smile with Jack, charmed and amused. Even Annalise Gideon and all her simpering attitude muffles a twittering giggle behind her hand.

Will doesn't look amused. He looks thoughtful. There's a crinkle between his brows that Hannibal considers reaching over and smoothing with his thumb; it's a deep and complex expression that he'd

like to see someday in the halls of famous galleries, in towering cathedrals. He waits patiently, expectantly for the conclusion drawn by that brilliant mind.

But even he can't anticipate the result.

The lines smooth. Will's mouth tilts upward in a smile. His eyes brighten, sparkle, and when he sits up at attention and turns to Hannibal, there is not a single person at their table that looks at anything but him. It is no less than he deserves.

Will says, "Why don't we?"

Hannibal blinks. He is not often taken off-guard, but this comes as a surprise. Will turns his hand beneath Hannibal's and twines their fingers together. Meets his eyes, cocks his head.

He'd believed Will to be stringently private; social upon demand, but not by nature. The idea of inviting others willingly into his space seemed one he couldn't reconcile until this moment, with the opportunity before them. Hannibal has never allowed himself to imagine what it would be like, with Will at his side playing host to the rabble. Never dared to imagine he might be interested in such a thing. "Would you like that?"

"Yeah, of course. Why shouldn't we?" Will replies, and behind him, Margot's eyebrows shoot upward. Well, at least Hannibal is not alone in his shock as Will scoots forward in his seat like a queen upon a throne. He glows. "The holidays are coming up—I'm sure we can pull something together before everyone heads away. School is out in a few days. I'll be around to help." His attention slips away, lingers in turn on the rest. He smiles, a mouthful of sharp, white teeth. Drums his red-manicured nails on the white tablecloth. "You're all invited, of course."

"The holidays are in just over a week," Alana says; she looks at Margot, and back to Will. Hannibal, too, watches him with interest. "That seems like a lot to plan on top of finals."

"So we'll start small. Just the people here." Will squeezes his hand. Stares at him expectantly, almost hopefully, and glances sidelong at Mrs. Komeda before he returns to meet Hannibal's eyes. "I don't want to hold you back from things you enjoy, I want to share them. And I can't have your friends thinking you don't come around anymore because of me."

Oh, Will. Impulsive thing. His thoughts are misguided, but the sentiment behind them is almost… touching.

He wants to share everything with Will. Not just the dinner parties, but the secrets behind them. The power in their mutual presentation. The performance, as Eloise proclaimed. The show.

But perhaps this is where they start. It will be tight, of course, but with a week's worth of time and with two people, it's not impossible.

Hannibal exhales gently through his nose. With it comes a smile. "I'll require your input on the menu, and perhaps your assistance in the kitchen."

Will's eyes shine in the glow of the lights. He is truly resplendent in shades of red, in finery and opulence no less than everything he deserves. Fairer than Aphrodite. A finer mind than the muses. The great and terrible glory of gods, and the grace of the Madonna. The kindness of an innocent heart, and the cunning instinct of a weathered predator.

Will lets out an elated breath, squeezes Hannibal's hand, and he smiles."Then it's decided. A week from tomorrow." But here, he hesitates. Opens his mouth, and closes it again. Then he looks to Margot, his lovely shadow, and Will says, "Sunday night, the 23rd?"

Her lips part. Press together. She huffs through her nose, and she shakes her head fondly with a smile. *"Oh,"* Margot says.

Hannibal looks at her, and then at him. Will lifts and lowers his shoulders in a tiny, uncertain motion. The others look on, curious, and Hannibal digs into his thoughts in search of the significance—

Abel snaps his fingers. "I remember! It was in your chart." He grins, and for just a moment, his eyes meet Hannibal's, and Hannibal feels… something. Nothing so overt as a direct challenge, but surely a threat. It raises his hackles, puts his mind on alert in a way that Abel Gideon has never quite pinged his radar before. There is awareness, there. Smug superiority in knowing something Hannibal does not, and it doesn't sit well. At all. "That's your birthday, Will, isn't it?"

Will blinks, startled; Annalise shoots him a narrow-eyed glance that turns to her husband, and Jack Crawford, too, inclines his head. Hannibal registers these things on the surface-level only, for the reality of his emotion stretches much deeper, much more complicated. Darker. Something that sparks inside him, stings, akin to hurt in a way that he doesn't care for whatsoever.

Will's birthday—he'll be twenty-one.

He hasn't mentioned it.

"Perfect," Eloise proclaims with a smile. "How old?"

Will glances up with a sly tilt of his lips, and taps one fingernail to the flute of his champagne glass. "Old enough," he replies.

Alana snorts with laughter. Bedelia shoots her a fond, sidelong look that slides to Will with interest. And, by extension, Hannibal. "To drink?"

It is said mildly enough that it is not directly accusatory, but Hannibal knows better. His hand tightens around Will's. Draws his attention. His eyes. They meet in the middle, and whatever Will sees, it takes him aback, for he answers with a constrictor's grip around Hannibal's hand.

Three squeezes. *I love you.*

Hannibal exhales. Squeezes back, and Will smiles. It's a little forced, but it reaches his eyes. It will be good enough for the rest, and for now, it is good enough for them.

"The makeup hides my wrinkles," Will replies drolly as he turns back to Bedelia, and Margot, too, snickers. Eloise and Gideon laugh outright. Even Bedelia manages a wan smile.

Hannibal hardly notices. Instead, he looks at Will. That's two surprises tonight, which are two more than he'd prefer when it comes to a lack of his own knowledge. The fact that someone *else* knew more about Will than he did notwithstanding, though whatever ugliness is expanding within Abel Gideon is something to keep an eye on. Whether he is simply a man with a monster growing inside him, or will prove a threat to Hannibal's dominion, he will be dealt with in due time.

As for Will's omissions, it'll be something to discuss later. To say something in front of others would break the seamless, cohesive image he and Will share. Something as integral as a birthday is not the

kind of information Hannibal can afford to make seem like he didn't remember—or worse, did not know.

He must have known somewhere, in the back of his mind. He, too, had seen Will's medical chart all those months ago. But since the dawn of their relationship, he had simply operated on the erroneous assumption that Will would *mention* something so important.

Of course, now, it seems obvious in retrospect that he wouldn't. That Will defaults to diminishing all sign of himself, all space he takes up. In public, he shines within the persona he wears, but in private, he still hides pieces of his mind. Of his heart.

It's a rude awakening.

But then Will strokes his thumb over Hannibal's knuckles, and his leg presses against Hannibal's under the table. He tilts his head, and his curls flow loosely around his shoulders. The earrings glimmer in the light. He's beautiful, attentive, and he lifts Hannibal's hand to his mouth. Kisses it in a way that reads affectionate, but screams of apology. Glances through his lashes, and in his face is open adoration that soothes Hannibal's most offended sensibilities, his pride. Will's silence was not borne of malice, he knows.

When Will speaks, his voice is hesitant, and every word carries ten more on its back. "Is that alright? I probably shouldn't have volunteered your house without your permission."

But Hannibal cannot deny him anything. The acknowledgement, at the very least, is enough to warrant what little forgiveness the situation calls for; Hannibal gives it freely. "Of course, darling. It's your home as much as mine."

Friends, Will called these people. It feels an unfamiliar concept, and Hannibal is not sure that all of them would be endowed with his friendship, if such a thing were to be given. But it's a small assortment of others that Will is comfortable with. It will be worth a short period of chaos.

And, of course, having an agent of the FBI inside his home, *entirely* on his own terms, is an advantage and opportunity most would not see for the blessing it is. A good impression now, reinforcing a positive first meeting, would be a beneficial arrangement. It would do nicely for *both* of them to not run afoul of Jack Crawford and his many investigations.

"Of course, as Will said, you're all invited. We'll discuss the details and send out formal invitations in the morning." Hannibal smiles, and the tension melts from Will's spine with the force of his relief. He nods once, acknowledgement of the matter set aside—for now. "Eloise, Mr. Komeda is, of course, more than welcome to join us. Bedelia, if you have another plus-one you'd like to attend, my door is open, since I'm guessing Miss Bloom will attend as Miss Verger's date."

Among their murmurs of thanks and Alana's pretty, flustered stammering, the pointed toe of Will's Louboutins drifts up and down Hannibal's Achilles tendon. "It'll be good practice," Will murmurs, lashes lowered. Pauses. Wets his lips with a flash of tongue. When he smiles back, it's a crooked, honest thing, and it lights him from within. "For when we live together all the time."

For a moment, Hannibal stops breathing, and embraces total stillness in favor of looking at Will. Taking in the sight of him here, and committing it to his memory. Yet another room dedicated to everything he does. Everything he is. "An excellent first step toward acclimating me to your constant surprises."

Across the table, Abel huffs out a breath. Reaches for his glass. “Well, it only seems fair to have a toast to our hosts, and the happy couple.” He shoots a sidelong glance to Annalise at his side, whose replying smile has too many teeth, and does not reach her eyes. “To love and changing circumstances,” he says, and he meets Hannibal’s gaze. “And all the things yet to come.”

Hannibal holds Will’s hand tightly. With the other, he raises his glass in time with the murmurings of *hear, hear*. “Thank you, Abel.” He tilts his head, and offers a mild, polite smile. He sharpens his reply to a cutting point, concealed so deeply in kindness that none will know it for what it is. “I can only hope for as many happy years with Will as you and your wife have shared.”

Annalise seems mollified, but Abel’s smile widens. It does not look kind. And Hannibal narrowly avoids baring his teeth in challenge when Abel pleasantly replies, “Yes. One can only hope.”

3:13

Chapter Notes

Sorry it's late! Life is nuts! AAAAAH!!

When dinner is done and the plates cleared away, the collective masses move back to the lower level for cocktails and mingling, upper-echelon small talk that consists more of golf and horses and the recent symphony fundraiser than anything of importance. A disquieted feeling lingers deep in Hannibal's bones, though it fades incrementally the longer Will stays at his side. He is bright-eyed, sharp-witted, attentive to Hannibal's many conversations but for those that slip into foreign language with dignitaries and the like.

Their group splits, and though Hannibal and Will stay within arm's reach, Hannibal is roped into conversation with Bella Crawford and other ambassadors from the UN; Eloise joins the lively discussion of current events. Will, rather, keeps company with Margot and Alana and several young ladies that seem to be Margot's own personal entourage. Hannibal is content to let him have his own time, since he is near enough that Hannibal can still catch snippets of the cadence of his voice.

Meanwhile, Hannibal plays his part as an educated, charming surgeon of note. Making a good impression with the Crawfords will go a long way. Not to mention that Annalise Gideon is doing her best to seem relevant by sticking with the more *adult* group, and though she looks rather irritated and bored to tears, it keeps her husband firmly at her side and within Hannibal's supervision. Gideon blends well, he always has; perhaps not the natural chameleon that Hannibal embodies, but adaptable nonetheless.

There is an ugly little twist in his gut when he notices Gideon glancing by him. Hannibal doesn't have to turn to know who he is looking at.

It's not jealousy. Indeed, to call it jealousy would imply that he is in any way insecure of Will's love for him, or believes Abel Gideon to be a threat to that love. Nor does he deny that Will is beautiful, and in many instances, Hannibal is pleased to see that beauty appreciated. Others finding Will attractive and admiring him are not an object of consternation, or in any way an obstacle, much like the many masterpieces of artwork throughout the world are better known for their ability to be seen and well-loved. And Will is well loved—Hannibal knows that, and knows whatever desires of Will's that he believes Hannibal Lecter cannot fill, he would never look for fulfillment in Abel Gideon.

There is only one other who knows Will's heart, and that looming stranger is no other at all.

But there's… something. Something to the way Gideon looks at Will, something about it that scratches idly at the doors and walls of his mind palace, some distant instinct that rumbles a warning to a fellow predator wandering too close to his den, perhaps in a tone too low to hear. Regardless, if Gideon is too deaf to heed that quiet, watchful warning, that is his own shortcoming.

Hannibal will not stay his teeth if Gideon should cross the line, wherever Hannibal decides it lies.

“Hey, Doctor Lecter!”

Hannibal turns from the lull in conversation to face the man who addresses him—a familiar voice, familiar face, and a familiar woman on his arm. He smiles, genuine amusement and humor. “I see you’ve updated your wardrobe.” He reaches out to shake hands; James Deioss’ tuxedo is black, but with a matted texture to the jacket that provides a striking visual appeal. “James. And Elle, lovely to see you again.”

Hannibal takes her hand and brushes his mouth across her knuckles, light and genteel. She smiles, a rosy flush coloring her dark complexion, her hair close-cut and natural. She is built like an athlete, a sharp-minded and no-nonsense woman who is dressed in a sleek deep-emerald pantsuit. She’s something of an advisor to James, and a close personal friend who keeps him on the so-called straight and narrow.

“Likewise, Doc.” She tilts her head, brown eyes sharp as they find Will behind him; track Will’s dress matching Hannibal’s suit. She nods once. “Is that your partner?”

“Where?” James asks, and then follows her gaze. Nods slowly, focused, and returns his eyes to Hannibal. Grins, charming. “Again with the matching, huh?”

“We coordinate well,” Hannibal agrees with a smile. “I’ll have to introduce you. Let me see if I can pull them away—”

An arm slips through Hannibal’s, and a body settles in close to his side. “No pulling needed, I’m here. Hi, I’m Willa.”

Will reaches out first, and James blinks. Grins. Shakes Will’s hand, and his smile grows at the strength of Will’s grip. “James Deioss, Esquire. And this is my partner in crime, and in law, Gabrielle Reveles.”

Elle shoots him an unimpressed look, then turns her smile to Will. “Elle. Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you,” Will echoes. There’s a glimmer of recognition in his eyes. “You’re Hannibal’s lawyer?”

“The very one.” James huffs through his nose. “Specifically, the lawyer on retainer for Johns Hopkins, but I’m Hannibal’s personal lawyer, as well. Though he hasn’t needed me lately. Not as many quacks coming through the hospital trying to sue. Logical people are going to put me out of business.”

“I heard the corporate sector’s got plenty of crazies,” Will replies with a laugh. Hannibal raises a brow; yes, he’s sure Will must hear all about that manner of thing through Margot. “Could always go the business route.”

“Oof. Couldn’t pay me enough.” James chuckles. And then his smile retreats a little. He’s interested, catching a scent, pursuing his own curiosity. He’s not unlike Will in that way. “What do you do, Willa?”

“Finishing up my degree,” Will replies easily. Grins, a cocky little thing. “Journalism, but don’t worry, I’m more focused on violent crime than medical claims.”

“Crime Journalism’s an interesting career path,” Elle says with a raised brow. She blinks, clearly reassessing Will, and her expectations of him. “Dangerous, sometimes.”

“Keeps things interesting.” Will shrugs and nudges his hip against Hannibal’s; looks up at him, and Hannibal hums his affection and content when Will’s lips brush his cheek. His voice is pitched low, softer. “I was actually coming to ask whether you wanted another drink.”

The alcohol bubbles within his belly, the very mildest warmth inside his mind. It’s getting late—some time still left before they depart, but he can always have a nightcap when they’re safely out of public view. “I think I’ve likely had enough if I’m to drive us home. But you’re more than free to indulge as you wish.”

“That would also keep things interesting,” Will replies with a crooked smile, and Hannibal can’t suppress one of his own. Unleashing a tipsy Will upon the social elite would be a pleasure and entertainment second to none. Will snickers like he can see the thoughts on Hannibal’s face and squeezes his shoulder. “Okay. I might go with Margot, so if you can’t find me, that’s where I’ll be.” He flashes that same smile to James and Elle. “It was really nice to meet you. Sorry to pop in and run off.”

“That’s alright, places to go and people to see,” James says easily and waves his hand; his champagne nearly sloshes from the glass until Elle catches his arm, more exuberance than drunkenness, if Hannibal had to guess. Deioss’ words, as always, are carefully chosen and pronounced, though he has something of a brash, jock-ish edge.

Will nods, turns to go—and turns back. Rests his hand on Hannibal’s arm, and glances up through his lashes. “Did you invite them? I know I said just the people at the table, but you know them.” Hannibal’s mouth twitches, unable to explain Deioss’ quirk before Will charges in and addresses them directly. “Hannibal and I are going to have a pre-holiday dinner party next Sunday. You’re more than welcome to come.”

Hannibal chuckles at Deioss’ raised brow. Explains, “James has a habit of rejecting my dinner invitations, unless he loses me a case. He has yet to do so.”

Will’s head tilts, and his brows draw together, lips turned downward in a frown. “Oh, really?”

“I don’t like feeling indebted to people I haven’t disappointed yet,” Deioss replies, and shrugs carelessly, casually. And though Hannibal had been wary of his reasoning at first, he has never found a reason for true concern; Deioss has paid no more or less attention to him than any of his other clients. It simply seems to be an aspect of his personality.

Will hums. Blinks slowly, catlike. “I guess I can understand that,” he says. “Well, the invitation stands. The table’s big enough for you both if you change your mind, no debt required.”

It’s certainly true, and a charming line. Will is resplendent, glittering, the picture of beauty and graciousness. Hannibal can see a flicker in Deioss’ face, open curiosity. “I’ll keep that in mind, Willa, thank you. That’s very kind.”

Hannibal cannot figure out why it feels so different from Abel Gideon’s.

Will pats Hannibal’s arm as he goes, drawing his attention. “I’ll be back.”

“I’ll be waiting,” Hannibal replies with a fond quirk of his lips. This is a good thing, he tells himself as Will slips into the crowd with Alana and Margot and her many acquaintances. Will spreading his

wings enough to coast on his own through an event of this stature is a desirable thing for them moving forward, for Hannibal to have confidence he may attend whatever social niceties he must perform without leaving Will to flounder in uncertainty.

He has always seen an equal in Will. To expect anything less as the end result of his transformation wouldn't afford him the respect he deserves. This is just one more step on a long journey to attain self-sufficiency as an adult, simply to shed it in favor of codependency as a lifestyle.

"I'm curious, now," James says as the click of Will's heels disappears under the sound of speech and the distant string quartet. "As to what the nature of trouble was that Willa got herself into a few months back."

Hannibal purses his lips; says, with just a little emphasis, though not enough to seem confrontational, "They were attacked outside a bar for the nature of their gender presentation." Deioss blinks. Elle's nostrils flare. "But were being relentlessly interrogated by the police officers for having a fake ID. An unfortunate case of placing the blame on the victim."

"Not my usual fare, but I can see why you'd think of me," he muses. Takes a sip from his glass. "But it's all blown over now, right? No issues."

"Nothing currently," Hannibal replies. Surreptitiously scans the crowd, but Elle shoots him a look, and he replies, "Some minor hiccups, but nothing substantial. Will has everything well under control."

A slight pull between her brows. "Sorry—is it Will or Willa?"

Hannibal huffs softly through his nose. Curses his own inattentiveness, but answers honestly, "It varies, at times. Tonight, Willa. At home, usually Will. I adapt to suit their preferences, name and pronouns."

James glances at Elle and back again. "That must be difficult."

"I don't find it difficult at all. A verbal slip in this case, but I find the mindset a simple thing to understand." Hannibal cocks his head, presses his lips together. "Others in our social circle know Will *as* Will. Identity is a fluid thing, but I embrace the person I hold dear above all others. Every aspect of Will, of Willa, is a comprehensive piece of a larger whole who is fundamentally compatible with myself as a life partner."

Deioss holds up his hands, though his expression is not defensive so much as it is self-deprecating. "My apologies, Doctor. I meant no offense, really. It's something clearly I could stand to learn more about, and look forward to doing in the future when our paths cross for pleasantries instead of business."

It's an adequate apology for what was meant to be an innocuous question. Some measure of irritation lingers, but in this case, Hannibal can allow it to pass. It would be far less convenient to dispose of him for a minor infraction and be cursed to finding another competent lawyer. He lifts his head, settles his shoulders, and nods simply. "You're forgiven. It's been a learning curve for myself as well." Exhales. Then, after a few moments of silence, offers a restrained, understated smile. "But I'm certain you'll have plenty of time. I intend to have Will with me for the rest of my life."

Elle's brows raise. James stares. "Jeez, Doc. So you were serious about it being serious. You got a ring?"

Hannibal blinks.

A ring.

It's a common-sense question. Mutually-beneficial partnership leads to engagement leads to marriage. And it seems such a common sense thing that Will is sure to be with him, always. It's clear he's receptive, and even desires their permanent status. And Hannibal has provided Will with a number of gifts throughout their courtship.

But it hadn't fully occurred to him to take the next step.

"I don't yet, no." He inhales slowly through his nose, and cannot help when his eyes wander fruitlessly, like he might see Will through the crowd right now if he were to look. To ensure his safety and continued wellbeing, and—

While he doesn't see his beloved, he goes still when he realizes that Abel Gideon, too, seems to have slipped away.

There's a nagging, prickling sensation of concern. Hannibal has never been one to mistrust his instincts.

"Excuse me," Hannibal says, and offers a wan smile. "I think I may have changed my mind about that drink."

James laughs. Elle, too, cracks a smile. "Don't think too hard, Doc. Good to see you."

"And you." Hannibal turns, and the moment he does, the smile drops from his face. There is something about this that is picking at him, and Will hasn't been gone more than five or ten minutes, but—

A crash, followed by gasps.

Hannibal's nostrils flare, his lip curls, and he stalks through the masses with cold, calm purpose. It requires being impolite, slipping between bodies and providing nudges when necessary, but he knows what's at the heart of this, and—

"Don't you ever, *ever—"*

But that's not the voice he expects.

Hannibal pushes through the crowd and takes in several things very quickly.

A table holding a tray of champagne glasses has been knocked over. The glasses have shattered, scattering in glittering shards all over the floor. Mason Verger sneers up at Abel Gideon, who is black-eyed with rage; behind him is Annalise, who looks genuinely sickened, though not at her husband's behavior.

Will is seated on the floor, looking shaken and pale. Margot and Alana kneel beside him, and Alana holds one hand in hers and inspects his palm, which even from this distance looks inflamed. It's likely Will caught himself on it when he went down.

Hannibal swallows his rage. Holds it within the pit of his stomach. "Will."

He looks up immediately, and across the space between them, their eyes connect. Will's expression melts into one of relief—but there's no worry in his eyes, nor anger. So unlike his last clash with Mason Verger, when Will was lit from inside with righteous fury, burning so brightly he couldn't

contain it within his skin. Now, though he wears the mantle of unsettled fear, beneath it, Will's anger is like still water, distant and undisturbed.

"Alright!" Jack Crawford snaps as he cuts through the crowd, and Mr. Merle is hot on his heels. Hannibal has never seen the stout little man look angry before. "Gideon, Verger. Come with me."

Gideon blinks. It's like clouds rolling away after a storm, with the way it lifts from his body, from his shuttered eyes. He looks startled. "Agent Crawford—"

"Now," Jack insists, clearly disgruntled that he is forced to deal with a matter like this on a night that was supposed to be anything but work. "Don't make me tell you again."

While he gathers the men, Mr. Merle apologizes profusely to the hotel staff. A crowd of onlookers have gathered, the whispers already spreading.

Hannibal doesn't care. He goes to Will. "What happened?"

Will shakes his head. His hair is disheveled, and he pulls his legs close, leans toward Hannibal. Reaches out to touch him; curls his scraped hand around Hannibal's wrist. His eyes are lowered. "It's fine. I'm fine."

Very well. Hannibal turns his attention to Margot and spears her in place. "Margot?"

She swallows tightly, squeezes Will's shoulder like any worried sister. "Will came with me to get a drink. Mason started… being Mason." Her smile flickers, a bitter thing, and Hannibal nods. "Then he tried to get to Alana and I, and Will got in the way, and Mason pushed him. He fell."

"It's nothing," Will replies softly. Tugs on Hannibal's sleeve. "I've dealt with worse. I'm fine."

He doesn't accept the placation. He keeps his eyes on Margot. "And Mason? Why did Abel hit him?"

Margot licks her lips. Glances away.

"Margot."

"He had…" Inhales and exhales shakily. "...things to say about culling unnatural stock."

The rage is black. Ugly. It fills him up inside, and Hannibal's lip curls. A miserable wretch of a man who flagrantly abuses what power he has. He is unsuitable to this world. Unsuitable to have *any* place in Hannibal's life, or in Will's, no matter how distant. Culling the herd? Oh, Hannibal can certainly think of a swine who deserves—

Will's fingers wrap around his bare wrist beneath his shirt cuff. "Hannibal, please. Please." He squeezes. Hannibal registers the sensation distantly, until Will squeezes again. "Look at me. Hey."

He does. His lovely Will, wholly unconcerned. Not a wince of pain to spare for his abraded hand, not an ounce of worry or attention to give as Jack Crawford rounds up Mason and Abel. Both wholly undeserving, but in this moment, Hannibal can summon some amount of thanks within him, for if Abel Gideon hadn't been nearby to take offense and throw a punch, Hannibal could not promise Mason Verger's spine would still be intact.

"Agent Crawford has this under control. Let's just go home," Will murmurs. He catches Hannibal's gaze, and his expression now is soft and soothing, a handler calming a beast. Hannibal *feels* like a beast, like a creature. When Will is threatened, he feels truly monstrous, and his furor demands a

direction. Will reaches up to touch Hannibal's chest, pet at his shoulder. To touch the side of his throat, and feel his pulse jumping in his jaw. "Okay? Take me home."

Hannibal narrowly avoids snapping his teeth. But he nods, takes Will's hands in his own and helps him to his feet. Will inhales, a steadying breath as he sweeps his hair from his eyes, then reaches out to touch Margot's shoulder and murmur his thanks, and to Alana as well. To ask a soft question and see her nod. Then Will returns to his side.

He watches.

Off to one side, Molson Verger's face is thunderous, eyes locked upon his son. He surely knows well enough to know who started it, but Hannibal would be unsurprised if James Deioss would not soon be faced with a lawsuit against Doctor Gideon for criminal assault. With this many witnesses, and with a family as powerful as the Vergers, Hannibal know they won't win.

It's why he won't be advising Will to press for the same. No. They'll find a time. Take direct action. The kind that the justice system cannot impede, stalling righteousness for technicalities of law and order.

If Will is ruffled, Mason Verger is positively askew, hair wild and jaw marred by a red mark that is rapidly bruising. He looks like a rabid animal, his manic energy barely leashed.

"Are you okay, Will?" Jack asks from nearby.

"Yeah," Will answers quietly, "I'm alright."

Mason's eyes lock on Will. His nostrils flare, eyes widen, like a pig squealing at the bars of its pen.

At his side, Will lifts his chin. Proud, defiant. One corner of his mouth twitches, blood red. Whether it's a snarl or a smile, Hannibal can't be sure, but he's positive Mason sees it when the man barks out an incredulous, infuriated laugh.

"Something tells me this isn't over," Hannibal murmurs as he reaches for Will's hand and twines their fingers together.

Will looks up at him and offers an exhausted little smile. He tips his head toward the door, and Hannibal nods; leans down to brush his lips over the crown of Will's head. He slips a protective arm around Will's shoulders and leads him from the hall, and Will replies, "It is for tonight."

The dress wasn't heavy, but being out of it feels like freedom. Will hangs it up on the back of the downstairs bathroom door; takes his makeup off with cleansing wipes and tosses them into the trash. Tucks the cosmetic case with Mason's hair into the soft-sided carrier for his makeup, wiggles out of the shapewear briefs, and rubs away the round red pressure mark the vial left on his belly. He sighs his relief once his skin can breathe; wraps himself in a soft, plush robe that goes to his knees, deep gray. Puts his hair up in a loose bun, and finally leaves the safety of this shrine.

He's exhausted. His hip is sore; his hand smarts. All worth the end result, but for the rest of tonight, Will just wants to relax. He pauses in the hallway and glances up to the glowing light coming from the upstairs stairwell.

Hannibal looked *furious*.

Will knew that Mason would confront a group he saw as weaker; women and girls and Will, who he's always underestimated—always, even now. Will didn't expect Gideon to step in as he did, though he's sure it'll work out in his favor. He rubs the back of his neck and sighs.

He never did get that drink. And he suspects Hannibal could use one, too.

Will pads to the kitchen in the dark. There's an undercounter wine cooler Hannibal keeps in the pantry for open bottles; Will's not yet confident enough in his own taste to open something fresh, but he's sure a bottle that's already open would be just fine. The pantry is dim, concealed as it is, but Will manages to select a bottle of white, and two glasses from the shelf above, wide but shallow bowls suspended on fragile stems.

Will's hands bear a fine tremor, which causes him to overfill the glasses by accident. Exhausted and exasperated with himself, he sighs. A generous nightcap, then, since there's no way to pour it back into the bottle without making a mess. Will corks what remains and puts it back, picks up the glasses, and turns to head upstairs.

He catches his toe on the back of his other heel, a clumsy mistake, and one glass sloshes over the side. Will groans quietly, when he hears the sound of liquid hitting the floor, and turns to place them back down. He searches for the light switch in the dark and wonders if Hannibal even *owns* paper towels as he takes a linen one from the drawer—

—but when the light is on and Will looks down, there's nothing there.

Will frowns; kneels and squints, cursing his lack of glasses while looking for clear liquid, certain he'll step in it if he's not careful, but…

Somewhere below, the sound of dripping.

Will stares down at the slatted hardwood floors. Puts his palm down flat and feels for moisture. Finds dampness, and slips his nail along the surface. His breath catches when his fingernail catches on a crack between two boards, wider than it should be. A flaw in workmanship Hannibal would never tolerate unless it were by design.

A trap door.

Will inhales unsteadily. Longing fills his ribs, and his heart pounds with excitement. He wants to see. Wants to go down there right now, dig out the last of Hannibal's secrets with his bare hands, but knows he doesn't have time. He knows he'd be caught.

And if he's not going to tell Hannibal the truth of what he knows outright, Will's certainly not going to let Hannibal catch him in the act.

He draws the towel over what little moisture remains and sops it up with fine cotton. It kills him to stand up again; even more, to pick up the glasses, now reasonably full, and use his elbow to shut the light switch off as he goes. To walk away from answers that his curious mind is howling for.

Not tonight. No, not tonight. He'll have plenty of time soon enough.

God, but he wants.

Will balances the glasses in his palm; checks the front door to make sure it's locked, and ascends the stairs. All the lights on the first level are off. It's getting late now, after ten, and Will can think of nothing he wants more than to share the rest of the evening quietly in Hannibal's company.

The door to the master bedroom is cracked; Will nudges it open with his toe. Hannibal turns as he enters, stripped from his tuxedo and comfortably clad in lounge pants. His lips curl into a smile when he sees Will's offering. "I'm not opposed to a nightcap, darling, but I'm sure we could drink downstairs."

Will brushes by him toward the master bathroom. "We're relaxing tonight."

Hannibal cocks his head; Will crosses the threshold and sets the glasses on the raised tile pedestal that houses the enormous tub, where he'd sat a lifetime ago in the aftermath of witnessing the bloodbath at the Beltway. Where Hannibal bandaged his legs and tended his bruised heart. Where Hannibal kissed him and meant it for the very first time. He leans back against the doorway now, bemused as he watches Will stopper the drain and turn the knobs, test the water with his fingertips. "A bath?"

"Yep," Will replies. He sits on the corner, waiting for the tub to fill as he meets Hannibal's eyes. "It's big enough for both of us. I think we both just need to…" Will inhales through his nose. Huffs it out as he searches for words. "Well, maybe it's just me. But I want to be near you, and my hip hurts, and I've never seen you use this thing in any of the times I've been here."

"I don't know that I ever have," Hannibal answers with a small smile, a huffed breath of laughter. "I'll admit I bought this house for its distance to the hospital and highway, and for the reasonably quiet neighborhood. It has enough space to suit my needs. I didn't think much about the bathtub."

Will wonders exactly how much *space* Hannibal requires to suit his needs. He stands; finds himself drawn to this man that he loves. He ducks his head, tucks his face against Hannibal's shoulder, and envelops himself in Hannibal's arms. Traces the tip of his index finger over the crest of one hip, along the waistband of the pants.

"So think about it now and come join me for a little while." Will inhales the scent of skin and sweat. Finds the tiny, darkened punctures his teeth left exposed to the open air and kisses them, gently chaste. "Please?"

"You have no need to beg, mylimasis. Spending time with you is not a chore."

Will laughs quietly; snaps the waistband against Hannibal's hip with his thumb, then turns his attention back to the bath. "Then get undressed and mentally prepared to soak for at *least* twenty minutes." Will shrugs the robe from his shoulders and hears the pause in Hannibal's breath, as telling as a gasp. Will smiles to himself as he sits and swings his legs over the platform. The water is almost too hot against his toes, but Will knows it'll cool quickly.

The water is halfway up the porcelain walls, but inches up significantly when Will slips in. He hisses as it envelops his calves and thighs, hips and chest. Will sinks into the basin and makes a helpless noise of pleasure at the heat, the sensation of it sinking into his muscles; looks up as Hannibal, too, slips over the edge and into the water.

Will turns off the tap; the water ripples around their shoulders, and Will purrs his content at the weightless sensation before he goes to Hannibal and simply… melts.

He crawls between Hannibal's legs, nudges them apart to make room. Slips his arms around his waist and tucks his cheek to Hannibal's shoulder. Will moans with quiet relief when Hannibal's legs tangle

with his. When he dips his head to kiss Will's cheek, and his hands spread warm and wide over his spine, his side.

It's peace. It's contentment. Whatever aches he felt before now are easing, and when Hannibal's arm moves away Will protests—at least until the jets turn on, and he is reduced to soft sighs.

"I don't understand how you don't just do this all the time," Will mumbles against Hannibal's neck. *"I'm* gonna do this all the time."

"What's mine is yours," Hannibal replies, quietly amused and equally indulgent. He rubs at Will's waist, digs his fingertips into the spaces between his ribs, and Will arches into the touch. "Perhaps I would use the tub more often if I had you here to share it with. I find this infinitely more enjoyable with company."

"Mmhm." Will drifts, weightless, anchored only by the arms that hold him, the breaths that lift and lower him like a ship on the sea.

But then—"Will."

"Mmhm," he says again. His eyelids are heavy.

"Why did you not mention your birthday?"

His eyes open.

He doesn't want to lie, but Will's not even sure he knows the truth. "I don't know. Part of me thought you knew. The other part knew you didn't, because you would have made a bigger fuss about it. And *I* didn't even want to make a fuss about it, right up 'til the second I did." He exhales, gentle. His body sinks, dependent entirely on Hannibal's mass. "I didn't mean for it to be a secret or anything. It wasn't something I was actively keeping from you, but with everything going on, it wasn't really… at the forefront of my brain." He licks his lips; his tongue touches Hannibal's skin, and mindlessly, Will kisses beads of water away from the sharp arches of his shoulders. "I'm sorry."

"Another question, if I may." It's not forgiveness, and that lack of forgiveness makes Will's chest clench, his arms tighten. Will swallows hard. "You didn't tell me about Freddie Lounds."

Will's hands tighten. Oh, this one is treading close to dangerous territory. He bites back an agitated grimace and swallows again. He avoids pointing out that Hannibal's words did not hold a question. "I was in the library the other night. Agent Crawford showed up out of nowhere. He didn't talk to me at all, not until…" Will trails off into silence. "Doctor Chilton was there."

As they are, not even a twitch of Hannibal's muscles would go without Will feeling it. He doesn't flinch.

Will continues, "They confronted Freddie. Something about stealing notes. I was minding my own business, I had more important shit to do. And she threw them in my face."

Hannibal's fingers tighten around Will's hip. That, at least, seems to have drawn a reaction. "Why?"

"She said, *I know you did this to me.* Which." Will takes a breath. "They were Chilton's notes. They weren't… exactly flattering. I hate Chilton, I wouldn't touch his shit. I figured he had notes on me, but I never knew he'd keep them. But Freddie usually owns up when she's caught, but she was trying to push the blame. And she was *pissed.* So if she didn't take them, and I didn't take them…"

Hannibal's voice is entirely neutral. Oh, if only Will believed him to be innocent. "You believe someone else may have played a part?"

"I don't know." *Of course I know.* "But it wasn't that important. Agent Crawford took care of it. I had other stuff to worry about. I didn't realize it mattered until it mattered."

Hannibal exhales. Nudges Will's shoulder. Pushes him back, and forces Will to disengage, disentangle himself. It feels like rejection, and when Will sits back against the other side of the tub, his stomach is too twisted all up inside his lungs to even think about drinking the wine.

Will draws his legs close. He feels wounded already. There's not much distance between them, but with that clinical expression Hannibal wears, it feels like a mile. "I only want you to confide in me, Will. If you're not comfortable doing so, then what are we doing?"

You fucking hypocrite.

Will's eyes burn. The anger builds, bubbles, but so too does the betrayal. How dare he, with the depth of the secrets Hannibal holds inside himself? "How can you say that to me?"

He sits forward, head tilted. "Will—"

"No." When Will licks his lips, Hannibal goes silent. Eyes large and dark and sharp with alarm.. "I've opened myself up to you, Hannibal. More than I have to anyone else before, and I work harder and harder at it every day. You know me better than anyone, but there's still so much I don't know about you. So if you want to tell me I'm not giving enough, then you're right. What *are* we doing?"

His eyes hurt, but Will refuses to let them well and spill over. He stubbornly pushes his back hard against the wall of the tub. He turns his face away. A lifelong instinct to hide when vulnerability strikes, and yet, here he sits, with it on display, in full view.

Does he really believe he has anything short of *everything* Will has to give?

Hannibal touches his knee. Scoots forward, and slips his hand to Will's thigh. He is bent forward, closing that space, even as she scales shift, as Will tries and fails to maintain it. "Will," he murmurs. "I didn't mean that the way it sounded. I spoke rashly and thoughtlessly. I apologize."

If it were anyone else, it would have sounded like a cop out. But here and now, and those words coming from Hannibal's lips—

Will looks back, and their eyes meet in the middle. "I don't know if you've ever really said sorry to me before."

"I try not to give myself reason to have to apologize often," Hannibal replies. He reaches through the water for Will's hand and holds it in his own. "Forgive me, my love. I'll admit I was…" Hannibal pauses. Licks his lips, and visibly settles on his choice of words. "…unsettled, by the happenings of tonight. I took my eyes from you for only moments, and even that was enough time for Mason to lash out at you. It's fortunate Doctor Gideon was there."

There's something to Hannibal's eyes, to his face; an edge in his voice that growls, creature-like, at the mention of Abel Gideon.

Oh, Will thinks, and the surprise of it is so sudden that it barely computes. *He's jealous.*

“Well, it wasn’t on my account,” Will murmurs. “After what Mason said to Annalise at the Symphony Gala, then what he said tonight, I’m not surprised Doctor Gideon lashed out.”

Hannibal’s brows draw together. “You believe he lashed out in defense of his wife?”

Will’s shoulders draw in; he feels his forehead crease, the corners of his mouth turn down, perplexed and melancholic both. “Don’t you?”

Hannibal is silent for a moment. He turns Will’s hand over and rubs idly at his palm. Watches the ripples in the bath water as he kneads at it with his thumbs, and beneath the disrupted surface, Will watches them move. “I had considered whether or not he felt the need to react in defense of you.”

Will looks up. His lips part, and the expression on Hannibal’s face is withdrawn. Unhappy. But he doesn’t hide. He’s just not the type.

What can Will say that wouldn’t be a lie? It’s true that he doesn’t know for sure that Gideon reacted in his defense. In fact, Gideon acting to protect Annalise would provide a solid check in his own favor, and a dark blemish against Mason—if the plan Will told him were *actually* the plan.

“I don’t need Abel Gideon to defend me,” Will says softly. “If he decided to, that was a demand of his own character, not because I asked him. I can handle Mason Verger. And if I couldn’t, I have you.”

Hannibal’s gaze is steady, searching. “But this time I wasn’t there.”

Will turns his hand in Hannibal’s. Leans forward so their knees brush. Touches the chilled tip of his nose to Hannibal’s cheek. “Hey.” Hannibal looks at him. “This time, I didn’t need you. And next time I do, you’ll be there.”

When Hannibal reaches for him, Will goes readily; crawls back into his lap and turns, his back to Hannibal’s chest. He angles his head to accept the line of kisses pressed to his shoulder and up his neck, lingering on that place just behind his ear where Hannibal’s teeth marks once again show. It’s a proud claim; a bold and brazen scar. If Will’s body is Hannibal’s touchstone, at least Will knows he’s his most treasured possession.

“Let us hope there’s no next time,” Hannibal says against his skin.

Will tips his head back until it’s pillowed by Hannibal’s shoulder. He looks back and up, upside down, wistful. “There’s always a next time. Mason’s a natural disaster. He creates the perfect conditions to raise Hell.”

“Until he meets an unmovable object, such as yourself.”

Will tilts his head sideways. He kisses Hannibal’s pulse. “Anything can be moved under the right circumstances.”

Hannibal hums; he doesn’t sound convinced.

“You disagree?”

“I believe there are some things that are immovable.”

Of course he does. Will smiles wryly. “Such as?”

But Hannibal is not smiling when he glances down and solemnly says, “Such as the sun rising in the morning, and the tides of the ocean. Such as the burning of stars millions of light years away. Such as the history of men that is already written in stone.” Hannibal’s arm wraps around Will’s chest. He lowers his mouth to touch the crown of Will’s head, and to the wild curls there, frizzy from the humidity of the bath water. Hannibal exhales, a heated breeze against Will’s skull. “Such as my love for you.”

Will closes his eyes at the press of lips against his temple; can feel a heartbeat slow and steady against his back as Hannibal reaches for one of the wine glasses. Lifts it. Sips from it. Then holds it to Will’s lips so he, too, can taste the crisp sweetness of the white wine burst across his tongue.

Perhaps Hannibal is right, and perhaps this love is immovable. But counterpoint to it comes an unstoppable force: fate barrelling down upon them, demanding a resolution and conclusion to the unraveling web of truths and lies they’ve built this bridge upon.

And if that is the case, it’s only a matter of time until something has to give.

“Well,” he concedes. “Maybe there are *some* things.”

He feels Hannibal smile against his jaw. When he tips Will’s head with a finger, Will goes without complaint or resistance, melts into his kiss and loops an arm back around Hannibal’s neck to tug him closer, always closer.

“I was wondering,” Will whispers against his mouth, “since I already brought Winston to Sarah’s farm for the break, I don’t have a whole lot of reasons to go home. And Wolf Trap is just as far from campus from Baltimore—“

“If you wish it, you may have it,“ Hannibal replies. His voice rasps, growls, a monster reassured at the presence of its mate. “It would make me very happy if you stayed.”

Will smiles. No, he never doubted, but the relief he feels regardless is sweet. “I’ll pick up the rest of my stuff on Monday.”

“Did you think I would turn you away?” Hannibal’s mouth touches his cheek, a flash of teeth.

“No,” he murmurs. “But I’d rather have you tell me to stay instead of telling me to go.”

“I would never.”

Will kisses him again and shivers pleasantly as Hannibal’s hands smooth over his chest, his nipples, his stomach, his sides. He leans back against Hannibal’s body, revels in his warmth.

Hannibal’s knees bend, bracketing Will’s hips. One arm loops casually around his chest; the other rests atop the tile pedestal, holding the stem of the wine glass. Will’s body goes lax, warm and soft and all of him gentle, absorbing every kind touch like it’s directly wired to his heart. Hannibal rests his chin atop Will’s head, strokes his thumb over Will’s collar bone, and with their bodies surrounded and supported by the hot water, it’s perhaps the most relaxed Will has ever been.

“This is the only place I want to be,” Will says softly. He tips his head and watches Hannibal’s face until their eyes connect, until he knows he is seen and understood. “I want everything. The mornings, the dinner parties, your hobbies. Even the bad stuff.” At the downward draw of Hannibal’s brows, he adds, “Arguing about money. Shoveling. Stupid things, even the things we’ve moved past, and all the

stuff yet to come. I want those, too." Will's pulse pounds thickly in his mouth. For a moment, he can't speak solely for how *much* he wants. "You're the one I want. The *only* one I want."

There's a question that burns in Hannibal's eyes, one he cannot give voice to, for it's based in information he's not supposed to know. Will can only soothe him without words in turn, placing his hand over Hannibal's and interlacing their fingers. He rests his head back. Closes his eyes.

Hannibal is quiet for a while—but when he speaks, his voice is barely breath against Will's temple. "Where does the difference between the past and future come from?"

"Mine?" Will murmurs. It takes no thought at all. *"Before you* and *after you.* Yours?"

"The same, I think. Never in my life have I met anyone like you, and I have never felt this way about anyone *but* you. And if I have my way, Will, there will be no *after you."*

I promise, Will wants to say—but he can't.

So he squeezes Hannibal's hand three times in short succession, swallows down his heart, and hopes.

3:14

Chapter Notes

shows up 15 minutes late with Starbucks and an engagement ring

be aware of the tags. they haven't changed, but be aware of them.

“Normal people don’t eat at seven thirty or eight! In what world is six too early?”

“It’s customary in Europe to eat smaller, later meals—”

“Hannibal,” Will drawls, legs kicked up onto the couch; Hannibal is seated at his desk, papers spread out before him. Will taps the end of his Bic ballpoint pen against the page of a marbled composition notebook. He’d refused the nicer materials Hannibal offered him. “We’re in Baltimore, and I know you well enough to know this meal won’t be small. We want them to digest before Christmas with their families.”

Hannibal exhales through his nose and shoots Will a complicated glance. He’s met with a raised brow and a wry look from behind the sleek frames of Will’s glasses, a silent *tell me I’m wrong* that Hannibal truthfully cannot argue.

But—“The portions will be small.”

“You’ve come up with twelve dishes, not including drinks and dessert. That’s a lot of food.”

“Dishes, not courses.”

“There’s a difference between small plates and finger food.” Will looks exasperated, though terribly fond; his feet are bare against the green suede, head pillowed on one arm of the couch, his toes tucked beneath the other to stave off the chill. He’s not yet pulled the knit throw over his body that Hannibal placed on the back of the couch. Stubborn thing. “Six o’clock. You know people are gonna want to mingle and talk for a while, and most of them will have to travel the next day. You can throw our next dinner party at eight.”

“Six thirty,” Hannibal counters. He huffs through his nose, a gentle exhalation. “Cocktails to start, and dinner will be served at seven.”

Will pops his head up and gives him a flat stare over the back of the couch before he lowers himself back down. He scratches something off on the notebook. “Alright, six thirty. But if people are here past midnight, I’m going to bed without you and locking the door.”

Hannibal chuckles, writing another address out on his list of attendees in flowing script. He’ll properly hand-write the invitations in calligraphy later; first, Will wants to design something on his

laptop to be printed on Hannibal's personal weighted stationary. A joint effort for an endeavor hosted by both of them. "Very well. And for the place settings?"

"It's ridiculous that you own five different sets of china, by the way," Will murmurs. He is eclipsed by the back of the couch, but Hannibal still smiles at the sound of his voice, and even now, he is agitated at expressions of what he regards as *needless opulence.*

"They're suited to different occasions."

"Okay, fine. It's the holidays, let's go with the gold ones."

"The Minton set?"

"If that's the Tiffany ones, then yeah."

Hannibal shoots the back of the couch an unimpressed glance. He knows exactly what Will is doing. "If you knew it was the Tiffany set, you might've said so."

Will, at least, sounds amused by his irritation. "You'll have to get used to me being a backwoods hick sometime."

Hannibal doesn't give Will the pleasure of his frustration. "We both know you're much more than that. Though an admirable attempt at making me underestimate you, if I didn't know you so well."

That, Will seems to find outright hilarious. He laughs, and the sound of it brightens the room. What little flickers of irritation he feels as they trade banter are immediately evaporated; the room feels warmer for Will being here as he scratches away at his notes, a last round of studying for those few finals he has left this week.

"You wouldn't be thinking you were underestimating me if you would ask me these review questions like you said you would. Then you'd see how smart I actually am, which today is *not very."*

"I have to get these invitations in the mail first thing tomorrow so our guests can RSVP," Hannibal replies. "Which means I need to know what information to put on them. As this was your idea, that requires input from both of us."

"Six thirty, barbeque dress, BYOB. I'll man the grill."

Hannibal rolls his chair around the side of his desk and places his arm on the back of the couch; peers over it, and sees Will lying flat on his back, grinning expectantly. "Now you're being deliberately contrary," Hannibal murmurs fondly.

"Oh, just now?" Will asks. He holds the notebook to his chest, and when the deep-seated creases of humor soften around his eyes. Will looks happy. Truly happy. "What happened to valuing my education, by the way?"

"It's valued. You are, after all, using your education to design our invitations, and this party will not only be a celebration of the completion of your semester, but of traversing the gateway to the rest of your adult life."

"It's a milestone, is what you're saying."

"It's an achievement to be proud of," Hannibal answers. He reaches over the couch, brushes a curl from Will's eyes, and smiles when Will's lashes flutter and he leans into the gentle touch. "This

endeavor was your idea, my love. I could leave it up to you, if you'd prefer."

"Okay, okay." Will sighs heavily as he pulls himself up and leans against the couch cushion, angling his head for a kiss that Hannibal gives gladly. "Fifteen minutes of serious party discussion. Then you owe me another hour of study help before dinner, and after that, we're gonna watch a movie or something on my laptop since you don't seem to own a TV."

Hannibal lifts a brow, intrigued but amused. "I own a tablet."

"I bet you don't even have Netflix." Will flashes a crooked smile when Hannibal doesn't deny him. "Alright, alright. Business first."

"Your dedication will be rewarded," Hannibal replies a falsely-solemn nod. Will's humor brings lightness to this office; his presence brings warmth to Hannibal's home. Brightness to his life.

Will leans forward over the back of the couch; his eyes flash as Hannibal rolls back to his desk, a playful hunter on the prowl as he purrs, "Oh, *really?"* His claws flex, knuckles tightening and loosening in preparation to shove off and give chase. "When?"

Hannibal smiles, feeling warmth in his chest and heat in his gaze, and he murmurs, "When you earn it. Shall we?"

The lights are low, and Will is warm. The couch beneath him moves; beneath his cheek, its heart beats.

"Hannibal?" Will mumbles. He rubs his eyes and blinks blearily; his glasses are nowhere to be found, and when he lifts his head, a gentle palm pets through his hair. Will looks down at Hannibal, comfortably ruffled, as he reaches out to tap the space bar of Will's laptop, set on the coffee table. The program pauses, and Will stares at the screen.

"Chef's Table episode *eight?"* Will says in mystified horror. "We weren't even watching Chef's Table. Why didn't you wake me?"

"You seemed comfortable, and this documentary series is well done." Hannibal's hand slips down Will's spine. He's painfully beautiful in his casual sprawl, in his heavy-lidded eyes as he blinks at Will with perfect contentment. "Shall we go to bed?"

"Mmm." Will lowers his face to Hannibal's sternum, rubs his cheek against the soft maroon sweater he changed into after… well, after their clothes required changing.

More than eight hours ago. Eight *hours?*

Hannibal smiles, a gentle tilt of lips, a warm glint concealed within the burgundy-red of his eyes. "There's still a few hours left of decent rest to be had. Come on." He taps Will's hip, and with the tips of his fingers, shuts the lid of Will's laptop.

Will barely makes it vertical. Hannibal holds him around the waist, steadying, tender, the both of them bare-footed and exhausted. A soft kiss against Will's temple makes his heart clench, his cheeks heat, and makes his body cold when Hannibal pulls away to go turn off the gas fireplace.

When Will looks at his silhouette before the flames, there are no antlers, no claws, no skeletal frame. There is only the man he loves who looks back at him and loves him in return.

“Is this how it’ll always be?” Will murmurs, half-asleep in a suspended state of realized waking dreams. He isn’t even sure he’s said it aloud until Hannibal takes his hand and smiles.

He says, “I hope so.”

Will prepares to leave on Monday morning armed with his laptop bag, a travel mug of siphon-made coffee, and a kiss to see him off at the threshold. He’s comfortable in red fleece-lined leggings and his chunky black boots, his thigh-length sweater almost dresslike, and his hair tossed up into a messy bun; when he puts on his green coat, he thinks he remembers what it’s like to feel the holiday spirit.

“Will, wait,” Hannibal says as Will starts down the stairs, and he turns back with a questioning glance. “Before you go, I have something to give you. I’m on call today, and if you need to get in when I’m not home…”

Hannibal presses a key into his palm. It’s silver, simple, the same bright shine of a knife blade or a Christmas bauble, and Will has to swallow hard to remind himself how to speak.

“Are you sure?” Will says breathlessly, though his throat is thick with longing to keep it, hide it, before Hannibal can change his mind, even though Will knows he won’t.

“Absolutely.” Hannibal gently pushes Will’s fingers closed. He smiles. “As far as I’m concerned, this is long overdue.”

Will’s fingers shake as he nods, works his key ring open to attach it right between his car key and house key. Hannibal smiles and brushes his mouth over the apple of Will’s cheek. “We’ll have to set an alarm code for you at some point, but in all honesty, I rarely use it. I am more concerned with you having the ability to come and go as you may.” He tilts his head, lashes lowered, and in the morning sun, God, he is beautiful. “I want you to feel at home here.”

“You know I do,” Will murmurs. His tongue feels thick and clumsy in his mouth, unable to form words that would explain the feeling in his chest. He has to settle for no words at all; an adoring kiss pressed against Hannibal’s lips that is eagerly accepted and reciprocated. Cheeks brush, noses touch, silent nuzzles that persist even once their mouths have parted.

Hannibal indulges him, understands him. He always does. He always has.

“Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome,” Hannibal replies, rubbing idly at Will’s shoulder, thumb brushing against the side of Will’s throat, just shy of the imprints of his own teeth. “I’ll see you tonight. Best of luck on your test today.”

Will nods mutely; kisses him again, for lack of desire to sound like a broken record. But there is one phrase he has never minded repeating—“I love you.”

“As I love you.” Hannibal tilts his head, a quiet kind of contented smile curling the corners of his mouth. “Bring back as many of your things as you’d like—not just clothing, but anything you wish. I have more than enough room to spare, and this place is both of ours.”

Will’s joy bubbles in his chest, in his mouth, behind his eyes. He has to go, but… “Better watch out,” he says, and to Hannibal’s quirked brow and indulgent smile, adds, “With talk like that I’ll have Winston living here before you know it.”

Hannibal blinks; his smile flickers, and Will almost takes it back, says it’s a joke, but—

“I’m open to discussion,” he says, and Will seizes him by the collar and drags him into a kiss. Touches his cheeks, his neck, his hair, kisses him frantically, so full of overwhelming love that he can’t speak or think or anything at all.

The Chesapeake Ripper, a man for whom everything must be perfect and just so—in the beginning it was just accepting Will’s mess when it was advantageous, strategic to gain Will’s trust at the risk of Hannibal’s own personal comfort, and now here they are. With Hannibal offering to put aside that instinct permanently, or what amounts to it, for the sake of Will’s *happiness.* A dog. *Will’s* dog.

Will holds the front of Hannibal’s sweater like a threat, breaks away when he can no longer stand not breathing. Stares at his beloved and his reddened lips, the stunned, intrigued glimmer in his eyes. “We’ll talk when I get back,” Will promises. “I gotta go.”

“I’ll see you tonight.”

He releases Will, but with clear reluctance. His hands flex idly at his sides when Will gets into his car and puts it in reverse, waves out the front windshield and heads for campus.

It strikes him how different the drive is from this direction, how different things look from the other side of the Capitol. How different *everything* is, now that he has put himself on Hannibal’s side wholly and unrepentantly.

But the world hasn’t changed at all; only his perspective. Everything is just the same as it’s always been, Will can just see *more* of it.

And though the skies are darkening with an oncoming storm, Will isn’t afraid. Within the contrast of the light and dark lies the makings of a masterpiece.

The tests go by. They’re exhausting, but nothing Will didn’t expect; he bids a polite goodbye to his professors as he crosses the thresholds on the way out. Two down, two to go; a presentation tomorrow, and another test the day following, but Will’s just eager for it all to be over.

He calls Margot on his way to the car, fragile flakes sparsely falling around him. Most melt as soon as they hit the ground, leaving damp spots on the sidewalks.

“Hey hon,” she says. *“How’d the tests go?”*

Will makes a vague, discontented grumble. “As well as they ever do.”

“So you aced them.”

He laughs. “Maybe,” he admits. “I guess I’ll find out in two weeks once the grades go out.”

“Mensa-baby.” Margot hums on the other line; Will can hear the distant sound of street traffic. *“Hey, what are you gonna wear for your dinner thing?”*

Will blinks. He pauses in his step. “I dunno. You saw, I have a ton of new stuff.”

Margot *tsks. “And as happy as I’m sure it’d make him, it won’t* ***wow*** *him. It’s almost your birthday. I’m in DC for the day. Come out and meet me, and we can go shopping. And have some…”* She pauses, too, and Will hears the weight of true intent in her words when she says, *“...girl talk. Life stuff.”*

About Mason, he’s sure. And about what happened at the hospital benefit. He owes her that much. “Yeah, I have… plans. Where to go from here. All that.”

“Good,” she says. She sounds satisfied, and not nearly as shaken as she had two nights ago. Not nearly as afraid as she might’ve a month ago, before Alana. Before she had something to protect other than herself. It’s funny what being in love does to a person. *“I’ll text you the store I’m headed to. You’re at school, still, right? Not home?”*

“Uh,” Will hedges. “Yeah, still school. Then home to get my shit. Then… um, staying the foreseeable future at Hannibal’s.”

“Oh my God, what?”

“I’ll be there in half an hour,” Will promises. “Shop ‘til then, and then gossip.”

“Oh my God, you can’t just—fine!”

“Soon!” Will resumes the walk to his car at speed. “I’m on my way.”

“Ugh.”

She hangs up, but Will can only laugh. Breathless, exalted, anticipatory of having someone to tell. Someone, other than Hannibal, who he can share this with. Who’ll know what it means.

Will can’t bite back his smile, his laugh. After all the years of worry and fear, he wonders if this is what it means to be free.

“What about this one?”

“Mmm,” Will replies indecisively, and Margot puts it back on the shelf. “I just want something… I dunno. Classy but flashy. Something that can keep up with him.”

“Hon, if you think you haven’t been keeping up with him, you might need some new glasses.” She smiles, but there’s lines around her upwardly-tilted lips that speak to her vague concern. It’s tempered

by Will's weightless smile in reply; fades away entirely at his loose, drifting footsteps in the unheard echo of a waltz step. "Or maybe you're just gone, I guess that's fair."

"He said we could talk about Winston," Will murmurs fondly, and Margot stops. Stares.

"Wow," she says. "So, like. You guys are really gonna move in together?"

"I want to." It's a confession that is murmured to designer clothing, since he's not quite brave enough to face Margot, lest he be on the receiving end of chastisement. He's not sure how he'd react to it. "I could winterize the house. Run antifreeze through the lines, lock it all up. Live with him in the winters, keep Wolf Trap open in the summers and stay there weekends so I could go fishing. Find a job at a local paper, maybe, since *Analysis* will be sunk once… y'know. *Once."*

"Will you shut it down?" Margot asks curiously. "Or will you let it die?"

The thought of letting *Abnormal Analysis* die a natural death is a painful one, but an unrealistic one. "I don't know. Once the Ripper is gone, it might make a decent book. People love that sort of stuff." It leaves a sour taste in his mouth, to think about monetizing his private thoughts and feelings in such a way. To allow people to think that Will would ever feel those things for Abel Gideon, when it has only ever been Hannibal. "But maybe not."

"I dunno. It might not be a bad thing to get something back from the pain this guy has caused you," she says, because for all Margot's knowledge and intelligent inferences, she doesn't know the truth.

She can't. No one can, or ever will.

"I'd rather it just be over," Will mutters. "I don't want to wonder where he is or what he does. I don't want to think about the Ripper anymore. I just want to be with Hannibal."

"After all these years, would it really be that simple?" Margot asks.

"I think it can, if I want it to be. And I do." Will inhales through his nose. Exhales. "Enough about him. You're supposed to be helping me shop." His lips curl in a small smile. Will pulls a sheer white blouse from the racks; inspects it, and places it back. "I've been thinking about trying something new with my hair. Maybe you can come over and help me."

Margot's eyes light with interest. "And see the good doctor's gothic lair? Finally."

Will snorts. "It's not that bad."

"Whatever, Countess Dracula, you described it as all decked out with chandeliers and horns and now I want to see it. I'll help you with your hair if I get to go to the humble abode."

Will huffs a laugh through his nose. "Fine." He inhales, then—"It's not just for the dinner, though."

Margot shoots him a sidelong glance. "Oh?"

Will nods, just once. He says nothing else, and she asks nothing more.

But after some time of searching through and rejecting clothing, Will ends the silence. "How's Alana holding up?"

"Fine. She seemed more worried about you."

“It would take more from Mason to keep me down,” Will replies with a slight smile. “He’s filing a lawsuit, I imagine.”

“I’d imagine,” Margot agrees coolly. “But I haven’t been back to the house since the benefit. Daddy’s not happy with me, but it’s that or leave me unsupervised with Mason, which it seems he might be realizing is the greater of the two evils. Not enough to do anything, of course, but just enough that he lets me get away with more.”

“His mistake.”

Margot’s lips twitch at that. “Maybe.”

“It will be. We’ll make sure of it.” Will lifts his head, his chin. His ribs expand with righteousness, with pride. And with fury. “You will have to go home, in the end.”

“I know,” she replies. Her hands pause on the garments, and finally fall away. “Will.”

He looks at her. Margot wears a complicated expression, and oh, don’t let her doubt him. Not now, not after everything. He watches her in silence and waits for her to speak, knowing she’ll understand it for attentiveness.

But she surprises him. “If I hesitate, don’t let me.”

Will reaches for Margot; in the middle of a high-end clothing store bright with color and texture and lights, they are two dark spots in the fabric of the universe. She is warm and soft and her nails flex against his back through the sweater she gave him. Margot is his sister in all but blood; his co-conspirator in a plot to destroy a brother who is blood, but nothing more.

“You won’t.”

An unsteady breath. He feels her nod, her hushed voice against his ear. “Are you really sure you want to do this? We’re risking everything. Alana. Hannibal.”

“If they knew, they’d understand why,” Will murmurs. His cheek brushes her hair; when he pulls back, she stares at him, searching for truth in his face.

“Do you really believe that?”

“Yes.” Will tilts his head. “Don’t you? Alana’s seen what Mason has done to you. She knows how dangerous he is.”

“I wasn’t talking about Alana.” Margot’s hands fall from Will’s shoulders, skim down his arms, his wrists. She tangles their fingers together, eyes lowered.

“Hannibal once told me that violence in the name of protecting our family isn’t violence at all.” Will exhales softly; he swallows, licks his lips. This secret isn’t his to tell, but if it will help her understand… “This stays between us…” she nods, and he echoes it. “...but Hannibal lost his sister when he was young. I know he would understand, because he would never want me to lose mine. You’re my family, Margot. And if the choice is between you and Mason, there’s no choice. There’s only stopping him before he hurts you so badly you can’t ever come back from it. And that’s what we’re going to do.”

He squeezes her hands. They’re not so different anymore—Will’s nails are still manicured from the hospital benefit, skin smooth and moisturized in a way he never bothered with a few months ago. In

another world, in a kinder world, perhaps they would have been born siblings.

But this world is the only one they've got, and they'll have to make the best of it.

"We can do this," Will murmurs as he turns away from her, skims his fingers over the garments hung on the racks, and casts a surreptitious glance to the attendant across the store who is still as absorbed by her cell phone as she was when they arrived, framed by a picture window and a picturesque scene as the snow falls outside and the cars pass through the Capitol streets. "And everything will be better when it's done."

"I know." Margot inhales; exhales, a brusque huff of breath. In the corner of his eye, Will sees her square her shoulders, lift her head. Confident, commanding. The Verger Heiress, instead of the woman he simply knows as Margot.

She plucks a hanger from the rack. "Ooh. What about this?"

Will pauses, and freezes when he sees what she holds. He takes it from her with careful reverence.

Oh yes. This'll do nicely.

He beams; Margot smiles, too, and *this* is what he wants, the ease and the comfort and the lack of fear, the confidence in themselves, and the knowledge that they can get away with anything, *everything.*

"I'll go try it on."

It's later than Hannibal thought it would be before he hears from Will. Four, five, and six o'clock all come and go before his phone rings just shy of seven; Hannibal had been considering the merits of starting dinner until that moment, and reaches for his cell which waits on the counter. It's either the hospital or it's Will—fortunately, this time, it's Will.

"Hello, my love," Hannibal murmurs, and holds the phone to his ear as he opens the fridge. He can hear the telltale sounds of Will's car in the background, the whirr of wheels on the road and it's wheezing engine. "Are you on your way?"

"Not yet, unfortunately," Will replies. He sounds tired, and Hannibal frowns. *"The tests ran later than I thought they would, and Margot wanted to meet up in DC on my way to Wolf Trap. I'm just leaving; I have to go home, get my stuff, then come back. I probably won't be there until late."*

Will blusters out a heavy sigh, one that Hannibal feels internally, but doesn't allow himself to express for concern that Will might believe him to be cross. He's not—not really, though Hannibal swats a cobweb of irritation away from the corners of his mental palace, and dutifully adjusts his plans for dinner to be suited for one.

"I understand. Do what you must; once your finals are over, we'll have all the time we need." Hannibal glances sidelong to the kitchen window; his frown deepens at the sight of snowflakes catching in the glow of the outdoor lamps. "How are the roads?"

"Kinda shitty," Will admits. Hannibal wrestles briefly with the intense dissatisfaction at the idea of Will staying home in Virginia tonight, but it may be worthwhile, if only for his safety. Will, however, beats him to it before he can say anything. *"But I'm coming home tonight one way or another. I'll drive as slow as I have to."*

Hannibal purses his lips; bites back a smile at the pleasure of Will calling his house *home.* But, too, concern lingers at the forefront of his mind. "I wouldn't sacrifice your safety for your presence, Will."

"You're not sacrificing anything. My car's good in the snow, I have new all-season tires, and I'm going ten miles per hour below the speed limit. I'm fine, I just won't make it home for dinner tonight."

Will sighs again at that. Hannibal makes a quiet sound of consideration as he removes the marinating flank steaks from the fridge and sets the bag on the counter. "If you're determined to come home, I'll make extra and warm it up for you when you get here. A reward for your perilous journey."

Will's voice is warm, but he drawls his exhaustion when he replies, *"That's not the only reward I want."* An inhale. An exhale. Hannibal stands still, the fridge door held open by his hip as he waits out Will's indecision and considers the vegetables before him. *"Actually, I... I mean. Were you serious, earlier? About Winston?"*

Ah. Hannibal thought that might be it.

He's not thrilled at the idea of sharing his home with an animal, true. But Winston is well-trained, not disruptive or destructive, and people tend to trust those who are well-liked by animals. But also… "I have more than enough space to accommodate him, and enough room in the yard and a quiet enough neighborhood that I believe it would be safe to exercise him no matter the time of day. He's well behaved, and he makes you happy. I want you to be happy here." Hannibal exhales gently through his nose, and considers the bag of baby spinach. He doesn't take it out. "I can't find any significant reason not to. So, yes, I was quite serious."

"And you actually want to? You're not just doing this for me?"

Hannibal huffs softly; the corner of his mouth turns up in a small, fond smile. "Of course I'm doing it for you, Will—that's the reason I want to."

"Hannibal, that's not a good enough reason to get a dog."

Hannibal raises a brow in the direction of a quart of cherry tomatoes. "It's a good enough reason for you to move in." At Will's stunned silence, he continues. "What would be the alternative? That you continue to live two hours away? Or that you search for a new owner for an animal you've had all your life? If having Winston in my home means having you here with him, that seems a very small price to pay, and a simple choice to make."

Will makes a quiet sound that is hard to interpret over the crackle of the line. Hannibal waits. The full feeling in his ribs is interestingly anticipatory, though he cannot seem to decide whether the feeling is positive or negative without Will's further input.

"We may discuss the matter further when you get here if you'd like to. But you should know that there are many new experiences that I'm willing to face in life, so long as you remain in mine."

A soft breath. *"You're unbelievable."*

Hannibal hums, amused. Soothed. "Am I?"

“Yes. And I wish I was already there.”

“I know.” Hannibal closes the fridge. “Other than the length of them, how did you feel your tests went?”

“Pretty good, actually. I dunno, the guy who helped me study seemed to know his stuff.”

Hannibal can hear the smile in his voice, and smiles in reply. “You’ll have to thank him, then.”

“Oh, I plan on it.” Will’s words roll off his tongue like honey, warm and slow. *“I think I have a lot of things to thank him for. It might take me a while.”*

“Sounds ambitious. He’ll have to make time in his schedule,” Hannibal teases. A smile pulls at his mouth, lashes lowered with intrigued pleasure at Will’s purr into his ear. It’s never as good over the phone as it is from his lips, but Hannibal will take whatever he can get.

“He better. It would be bad manners to refuse my thanks, I think.”

Hannibal laughs. Genuinely. “Oh, would it?”

“I think it would.”

He selects a knife from the chopping block and a skillet from the cabinet; pours oil into the shallow pan and turns on the burner. Picks up the shrink-wrapped flank steaks. “Very well, darling. I suppose I’ll just have to look forward to—”

*“Jesus **Christ**,”* Will snaps, and Hannibal pauses. *“You’d think there weren’t three fucking lanes and no other cars. Just go around, dude.”*

“Are you alright?” Hannibal asks, knife poised in hand.

*“Yeah, just some idiot—dude, **really?”***

Hannibal’s teeth clench. “Can you pull over?”

“I’m in the rightmost lane with my fucking flashers on, I don’t know how much more clear I can make it that I’m—” Will snarls, and Hannibal bares his teeth in response at the unseen threat. There’s nothing he can offer aside from his silence and hope that Will’s concentration holds.

“Do you see the license plate number?” Hannibal asks, because his predator’s instincts demand it. Anger in the place of fear. His knuckles are white; his fingers ache with the force of his grip.

*“No, I—I’m just gonna pull— **are you—oh no, oh FUCKFUCKFUCK—”***

The sound of metal hitting metal doesn’t translate well over a phone line. It simply sounds like a bomb going off. In the wake of the cacophonous racket of the crash, followed by another, and then the distinctive sound of something rolling, the call cuts out—

Hannibal is left only with the sound of his own heartbeat in his ears, and the howling void of Will’s silence.

3:15

Chapter Notes

Please be aware, the same warnings as the last chapter still stand re: dealing with the aftermath of a major car accident. So sorry that I'm behind on comments, I hope to catch up very soon!!

ALSO, a note: I am MOVING (yes, AGAIN, I KNOW) and so Headlines may end up going on a brief hiatus until I move at the end of the month. I'm uncertain how packing will effect my posting schedule right now. I might have more updates in the meantime, I might not. For more information and/or any questions, I'm easily reached on Twitter @maydaymaydei or on Tumblr @maydei.

Hannibal slams the knife down. His hands shake, and he is already in motion as he rips the door of the fridge open and throws the bag with the flank steaks back inside. Shoves it closed with a *bang* that shakes the walls, the floor.

This kitchen holds so many memories. This can't be the last one—

He presses *redial.*

It rings and rings and rings, and that means that, if nothing else, Will's phone is not so destroyed that it can no longer accept calls. Which means if he calls, Will may be able to hear it. May be able to answer.

It goes to voicemail as Hannibal opens the hall closet. He has never put on his coat and shoes so quickly in his life, and it hurts when he cuts off the sound of Will's voice, hangs up without leaving a message.

He calls again.

There is something inside crawling up his throat, clawing at the inside of his ribs. It's screaming, terrible, shrieking with a voice that sounds like the memory of his baby sister crying. There was nothing he could do then. He refuses to let that be so now.

"You've reached Will Graham. Please leave a message with your name and number and I'll get back to you."

He hangs up. The Bentley's engine roars. Hannibal puts his phone in the dashboard mount.

He presses dial again as he reaches below the driver's seat and extracts the handheld radio police scanner. Turns it on. Leaves it on the passenger's seat, and doesn't even worry about how he'll explain it to Will once he finds him and brings him home.

He drives. He hangs up. He calls again.

What does he know?

Will was leaving from Washington, DC. The roads were bad. Three-lane highway, headed home to Wolf Trap.

He was with Margot.

Hannibal hangs up, and thanks whatever gods or demons or infernal creatures that care to accept his praise that he collected Margot Verger's phone number from her chart after he treated her.

"This is Margot Verger. Who are you and how did you get this number? It's supposed to be private."

"Margot," Hannibal says, and his voice grates like glass in his mouth. "This is Hannibal Lecter."

"Oh." She sounds relieved, up until the moment that relief sharpens under the keen direction of her shrewd mind. Smart girl. *"What's going on? I'm guessing this isn't a social call."*

Hannibal forces the words out. "I believe Will's been in an accident. I need to know where you met with him today so I can find him."

Margot curses, venomous and vitriolic. The sound of it squeezes like iron chains around Hannibal's heart. It's not the voice of a person who is surprised. *"He left about half an hour ago from the West End off Pennsylvania Ave. With the weather, he probably got on Route 66 toward 267. It's what I would have done."*

"Thank you, Margot," Hannibal says; the platitude is clipped, and he makes to hang up—

"Call me when you find him," Margot says. It's not a suggestion. *"When he's safe."*

Neither of them voice the fact that *when* is actually a very big *if.*

If is not acceptable.

"I will."

He hangs up.

He calls Will again.

Hangs up. Calls again.

Puts the Bentley's engine to good use, and keenly listens to the police scanner over the sound of the phone ringing, ringing, ringing.

"You've reached—"

"You—"

"You've reached Will Graham—"

"All units, please advise, 8410-Adam reporting a 11-79 on Route 267, mile marker 123 prior to exit 16. Code 909. 10-33. Please be aware of hazardous road conditions, over."

“10-04, 8410-Adam, over.”

Too far away. Much too far away. Hannibal puts the gas pedal to the floor, and keeps calling.

Will doesn’t answer.

It’s dark. The roads are wet, accumulating slush. The blue and red lights bounce off the freeway, and Hannibal pulls the Bentley over to the shoulder behind a police car and an ambulance, pulled up to the very edge of a sharp drop, headlights shining down upon a scene within the dark.

The guard rail is destroyed, twisted metal warped by brute force, left with jagged edges that look like Hannibal’s organs feel when he sees the Volvo overturned at the bottom of the ditch.

His breath leaves him. But, he tells himself, there is no Coroner’s vehicle, and at the bottom of the torn-up incline, there are firefighters with the jaws-of-life and power saws tearing at the ruined frame of the exposed driver’s side.

Hannibal reaches into the back seat, withdraws his portable emergency kit, and gets out. He’s going to get Will. There is not a soul alive that is going to stop him.

“Sir!” An officer says, voice sharp with command and alarm. “I’m going to have to ask you—”

“I’m a doctor,” Hannibal growls, the same automatic words that have gotten him onto a dozen scenes a dozen times—

“We have paramedics on site. Please get back in your vehicle—”

“Virginia license plate LTIJ-8112? Volvo station wagon, gray.” Hannibal’s hands twitch at his sides, aching to snap the man’s neck and get *down* there already. He has to. He *has* to.

The man’s eyes widen. He glances toward the scene. “Sir, unless you’re the victim’s family—”

Hannibal rubs his free hand over his face. It’s not entirely for show as he inhales unsteadily and exhales his impatient fury, his boiling rage, and a deeper, darker emotion that he doesn’t want to name. Cold. Terrible.

How dare this insignificant animal stand in his way.

Hannibal shakes. He cannot seem to find his own control in the wake of this feeling that is so much worse than *fear.* But sensibility overrides it. Logic, in the face of adversity.

If the technicalities of the law would stand between him and Will, then Hannibal will manipulate it to his advantage.

“The *patient’s* name is Will Graham, and he is my husband. And provided that he is alive and his condition is not life-threateningly dire, I want him taken to Johns Hopkins Emergency Medical Center.” There is coiled tension in every muscle of his body as he stalks to the edge of the incline and gazes down over the edge. It’s not unlike looking long into an abyss.

Hannibal braces himself and slides down.

At the bottom of the ditch is chaos.

Firefighters and paramedics swarm the vehicle. The driver's side window and windshield are broken, presumably for access to—

Will.

"Sir, you can't—!"

"My name is Doctor Hannibal Lecter," he snaps as he wrenches open his kit and pulls on a set of nitrile gloves and kneels in the slush. Undoubtedly, his coat and suit will be ruined by the end of tonight. It's the furthest thing from his mind. "I'm an emergency trauma surgeon at Johns Hopkins, and this is my husband, Will. I'm sorry to intrude upon your scene, and I'm familiar with protocol, but I will not be leaving him unless you intend to have me arrested, and I strongly suggest that we dedicate our efforts to saving his life. Shall we?"

The woman stares at him, tense-jawed and hard-eyed. But she relents, exhales sharply through her nose, and kneels beside him. "He's unconscious. I need to secure his neck before we can move him. The door's smashed shut. We got on scene about fifteen minutes ago, fire and rescue was ten ahead of us. Any medical history I should know about?"

The sight of Will trapped within his vehicle is one that Hannibal is sure he'll remember for the rest of his life.

The seat belt holds him in the driver's seat. His face is cut along his jaw and the bridge of his nose, small lacerations that sluggishly drip blood, slowly congealing. His hair is a mess, falling from that same familiar bun he puts it in whenever it annoys him; some of his bangs are stuck to his forehead, but tendrils are pulled by gravity down and away.

On the ceiling of the overturned Volvo, beneath Will's head, is his cracked cell phone.

There is a moment of nothingness, a void encompassing his heart at seeing Will like this. Broken. Bloodied.

Hannibal knows he can't touch Will before they secure his spine, though the instinct to rip him from inside this twisted metal cage is immense and all-consuming. Instead, Hannibal reaches for the phone. As he lifts it, the screen lights and displays a list of missed call notifications—all of them, his. All of them, unanswered.

"No, nothing relevant. Will's active, and until this, healthy." He puts it into his pocket. Then he lowers himself to his belly in the cold, wet slush, out of the way of the feet of the rescuers that saw away at the bars of this cage. "Will."

The crunch of metal is deafening, the headlights from above used to illuminate the scene are blinding; the smell of oil, rubber, and gasoline, overpowering. So too beneath it lingers the scent of blood. But it is only beneath; Hannibal has seen with his eyes, knows with his heart that Will is wounded, but he is alive.

He's alive.

"Will, mylimasis, can you hear me?"

No response—but the light catches his torso, and Hannibal can finally see the shallow rise and fall of his chest that indicates he's breathing. He's breathing.

And then, there is a flicker of a shadow. Barely enough to be called anything, but Hannibal knows him. He knows the first signs of Will waking in the morning, the first expressions to cross his face, the first sounds to leave his mouth. He knows them. He knows Will. And he will not be deterred.

"I'm right here. We're going to get you out. Can you hear me, darling?"

The paramedic at his side, too, lowers herself. her eyes are intent on Will; her face creases with confusion at the softness of his features in relation to the pronouns Hannibal has used for him, and if it were anything but medically and legally relevant, Hannibal would have allowed those lines to blur. But Will's care will be expedited by his identity matching how he is identified on his driver's license, and Hannibal doesn't have the seconds to waste for their questions. Tonight, his primary concern is getting Will safely into his arms.

A soft noise—nearly drowned out under the racket of the machinery. Hannibal's lip curls to expose his teeth. He feels like an animal. Other. And the desire to rip out throats with nothing but his fangs is nearly undeniable.

But that would take him away from Will. So in a moment's lull, he instead commands, *"Be quiet!"*

The machines cut out. Even the annoyed, confused murmurings of the firefighters go silent. There, on his belly in the mud and snow, with Will's life hanging in the balance of a seat belt that might as well be The Hanged Man's noose, all is still.

"Will," he says. "I'm here."

A crinkle across his brow. A flutter of lashes, and then—

A soft, agonized groan. The sound of it is torture, tied directly into Hannibal's own body. The sound of it is raw relief, bursting from within his guts, his heart.

"Will, I know you're tired, but I need you to open your eyes," Hannibal implores. "I'm here, darling. I need you to talk to me."

There's blood in his eyes. They crack open and Will hisses at the sting, at all other pain he feels, which likely includes a headache from being suspended upside down, and whatever else. He almost certainly has a concussion at the least; broken bones notwithstanding. "Mmph."

"I know," Hannibal says, and the relief of even seeing him *awake* is so keen that his eyes burn like it's his own blood in them, like it's he himself trapped at Will's side. "I know. You're doing so well. Open your eyes, Will."

They open, hazy and unfocused, and the paramedic at his side exhales her relief.

And then comes the panic.

Will's mouth opens; his body twitches hard and he moans in pain, but his breathing speeds in harsh, shallow breaths that barely enter his lungs before they leave again. His arms, which until now had found their place above his head—and fortunately not crushed, as the roof of the Volvo had held some structure—curl and clutch and Will gasps at whatever he feels. Broken glass, surely, among other things. Perhaps rebroken.

“I—” His lips tremble. His body lurches, his voice cracks. Will’s eyes fill with tears and well over in muddled streams of blood-tinged pink, dripping over his forehead and into his hair, and Hannibal is consumed by what may have clawed its way to the honor of worst emotion he’s ever felt in his life.

Through everything they’ve been through, Will has never cried. Not since—

“Hannibal,” Will whispers.

“I’m here.” He reaches through the window, ignores the protests of the paramedic, and ignores his own desire to touch Will’s face. Soothe him. Instead, Hannibal finds his wrist and presses his fingers to his pulse, counting heartbeats. “I found you, darling, I’m here. Can you move your fingers for me?”

It takes a long, suspended moment—but he does.

Hannibal exhales sharply. Nods once. “That’s good, Will. How about your toes? You’ll have to tell me yourself.”

“I can—y-yeah.” Will hiccups. His body lurches again, and when his fingers curl, he reaches for Hannibal’s hand. “Where am I?”

Not *what happened?* Though, to be fair, that does seem terribly apparent.

“Your car went off the road on the 267 West.”

“The—” Will’s fingers are clumsy, and before he breaks Hannibal’s concentration with his grip, his pulse is thready, but strong. Alive. Panicked, wounded, but alive. He chokes on his breath; when he does, Hannibal, too, cannot breathe until he forces the words out. “—not—not the Beltway?”

Oh. Oh, no.

Hannibal ducks his head, and for a moment, he cannot look at Will. He cannot see that terror, that pain. He cannot look into Will’s eyes and see the evidence of the scars he left on his beloved, so deep the wounds have become subconscious.

He wonders how many nights, when Will suffered nightmares and twitched his way through sleep until Hannibal soothed him, he was dreaming of that place. How many times he re-endured those horrors, but never mentioned.

“No, darling. No,” Hannibal chokes out, and squeezes Will’s hand in his own. Hard. “Will, we need to get you out. I’ll have to let go—”

“No!” Will digs in with his fingernails. Undoubtedly draws blood with a grip that surely could not be so strong if his arm were broken. His eyes are glazed; his face twisted with agony, panic. “Please, Hannibal, no, don’t—”

The sound of Will’s pain reverberates directly into his soul. It’s been years, but—

His eyes burn. Sting. Not just from the scent and sight, but from the feeling overflowing. Pain and relief, joy and guilt. Fear.

Will is silent but for his gasping breaths when Hannibal’s eyes overflow.

“Will,” he says. “Please. Just for a moment, I need you to let go. Every minute you stay in there is a threat to your life, and if you di—” His voice cracks. It should be humiliating, but it’s not. It’s

horrifying for a different reason altogether. “If you died, I would never be the same.”

Will inhales. He sobs. He nods, lets go, and when Hannibal pulls his hand free, he is marked with five crescent-moon gouges from Will’s fingernails.

Hannibal pushes himself back, away from the Volvo. Away from Will. When he stands, he is wet from collar bones to pant cuffs, and he doesn’t care.

He swipes at his eyes with the back of his hand. It’s an instinct, and a fruitless one, for he’s sure he’s only managed to spread blood and mud. “Get him out.”

The firefighters converge, now able to be guided through the process by a cognizant, if terrified, patient. Hannibal turns to one of the other swarming paramedics. “We need a neck brace and an all-terrain stretcher. You’ll be taking him to Johns Hopkins. When we get back to road-level, I’ll use your radio and call ahead so they expect him.”

“Yessir.”

It takes time. Time that Hannibal despises for its necessity, as the firefighters figure out how best to remove the door to access Will without losing structural integrity, which could cause him to be crushed. It’s a delicate job, and Hannibal lingers nearby, though not close enough to be in the way.

Even under the screaming machinery, he can hear Will’s sniffles.

He pulls his phone from his pocket.

“Is he safe?” Margot demands.

“He’s alive,” Hannibal answers. “And conscious. I’ll call you when we reach the hospital. It’ll be at least another hour to get him out and make it there, but from what we can tell, his condition’s not critical.”

“What happened?”

The anger bubbles, now. And though he knows they’re lucky, so lucky, he cannot help the blinding rage at the affront of God presuming to see Will wounded, even if his life is spared. Hannibal snaps his teeth. “The end result? He went off the road, and his car overturned. He’s lucky he’s not dead. The cause? I’m not yet certain, and Will’s in no condition to answer us yet.”

“Jesus. But he’ll be alright?”

“He *will* be,” Hannibal snaps. “Or everyone involved will *not* be.”

He hangs up.

It’s undeniably rude.

It’s a process to get Will out. The driver’s side door comes off. So, too, does the rear door. There’s about a dozen people involved in the process of cutting Will’s jammed seat belt and getting him onto

the backboard without letting him fall, and by the time he is extracted, Hannibal knows this car will never drive again.

One more relic of his old life, gone. But at least he *has* his life.

He's waiting at the moment Will is freed. And suddenly, Hannibal understands how seasoned professionals can forget years of training in favor of a reassuring touch from the one they love.

He touches Will's cheek, his hair, brushes the softest and slowest of kisses to his mouth and tastes blood.

"My stuff," Will whispers. "Can you—"

"Where is it?" Hannibal asks, smoothing his wet hair from his face. His hands come away red.

"Backseat. My backpack, and the other bag too." Will swallows hard. His eyes are lowered. "They're probably both ruined, but…"

"I'll get them," Hannibal promises. As the paramedics push the stretcher up the steep incline, Hannibal goes to the ruined shell of the car. Fortunately, with both doors gone, it's easy to find what he's looking for.

There's a telltale rattle of glass inside Will's backpack. It figures—Hannibal wouldn't have expected his laptop to survive, but perhaps the data can be recovered. He'll buy Will a new one.

Crumpled on the roof is a nylon garment bag; even under the lingering scents of blood and sweat and gasoline, the fabric and plastic smell new. Hannibal pulls it out by the metal hook of a hanger; but when he stands and holds it up to the remaining light, he can see no tears or shreds in the protective covering. Whatever Will had purchased while out today with Margot may very well be intact.

He's curious—but not that curious.

Hannibal ascends the incline, thankful that he left the Bentley close to the ambulance. He catches Will's eyes and nods as he goes to his car and lays Will's belongings safely in the trunk. Closes it. Returns, on legs that feel too shaky for someone who was not the victim of this accident. His heart thumps unevenly, seeing Will bathed in the sterile light of the ambulance as they load and lock the stretcher in place. Will's head is secured by the neck brace, and it twists in Hannibal's gut that he looks too exhausted to be embarrassed by the indignity of it.

Hannibal climbs into the back of the ambulance and kneels at his side. Takes Will's abraded hand in his own and holds it to his mouth. Kisses his knuckles. Treasures his warmth, his life, even his bleeding as evidence that Will is alive.

With his other hand, he reaches for Will's face and brushes back his bangs. Stands on his knees and leans over his beloved, and so very gently, he touches their foreheads together.

"I can't ride with you," Hannibal says softly; the words are bitter, ugly, and he despises the logic that has brought him to that very conclusion. At Will's quiet, upset sound, he adds, "I have to drive the Bentley to the hospital. I'll be right behind them the whole way, but I have to be able to get you home when this is over. You understand?"

Will's mouth pulls in a grimace. His eyes are wet, but the disappointed noise that pulls from his throat is not outraged or surprised. "I understand."

Hannibal touches him because his heart demands it. The flutter of Will's lashes, his subtle lean into the press of his fingers is such a sweet reward that Hannibal lifts Will's hand to his face. Gently spreads his fingers, and lays his cheek in Will's palm. Presses his nose to Will's wrist. Nuzzles him, and bites back a wounded noise of his own—but he feels it, regardless.

"I love you, Will. I…" He stops. What can he say? What words could even begin to describe the emotions inside him? Are there words that would suit at all? It doesn't seem like it; not when all Hannibal wants is to kiss him, to bypass words entirely, and let Will taste the truth from his mouth, right from the source. "I…"

"I know," Will whispers; his eyes are shiny with salt water tears; he strokes his thumb over Hannibal's cheekbone, and it feels like benediction.

"Doctor Lecter," the paramedic says gently; the touch against Hannibal's shoulder feels foreign and strange. Not Will. Not welcome. "One way or another, we need to get your husband to the hospital."

Will blinks. The tears spill over. His bloodied lips part, dyed red with the proof of his life, and he looks at the paramedic. Looks at Hannibal. "Your—"

"Yes, of course," Hannibal replies. His voice is quiet under the rumble of the ambulance's engine, the distant crackle of the radio. He holds Will's eyes and watches them widen, soften, well over again, and Hannibal wants so badly to kiss him.

He wants to stay.

He can't stay.

"The radio, please," he murmurs. They hand it to him. "Johns Hopkins Medical, this is Doctor Lecter. Incoming Priority Two, one hour outbound. Patient name: Will Graham, requiring cranial CT and x-rays following major motor vehicle accident. Page Nurse B. Ramirez upon arrival, as well as Franklin from Radiology, over."

"Copy, Doctor Lecter. Incoming Priority Two, one hour outbound, prepping radiology. We'll have an OR cleared and ready as needed, over."

Hannibal hands off the radio. He braces himself on the side of the stretcher to lean over Will, to touch his face. Kiss his forehead. "I'll be right behind you, mylimasis."

Will nods in silence; looks up at Hannibal through wet lashes with trembling lips and covers Hannibal's hand with his own. He's trying so hard to be strong when his foundations have been rocked, when his walls are collapsing.

Hannibal, too, has been shaken. Tonight, nearly destroyed.

"Hurry," Will whispers.

So he does. Hannibal exits the ambulance and takes swift strides to the Bentley. The car's interior is dark, wood and leather-scented, and Will. Will, pervading everything he does. Everything he is.

He watches through the windshield as the ambulance doors shut; as all he can take in of Will is the glimpse of his face captured through the square window in the back. Will can't see him now, he knows. It's too dark outside, the Bentley's windshield tinted against UV exposure, and at night, that means it's all but impenetrable by artificial light, so—

Will cannot see him. But Hannibal can see the moment Will's composure breaks, that he presses the heels of his hands to his eyes and his mouth twists and his shoulders hunch, when he tries to curl in upon himself and can't because of the structures in place to hold his spine straight in an attempt to prevent further injury.

Will cries, not knowing Hannibal can see him, not knowing that what is left of his heart fractures at the sight of it. The passenger seat beside him has never felt so empty, and the dampness of Hannibal's clothes sinks into his bones, a persistent chill that even the heated seats cannot disperse.

The ambulance's siren blares. The lights go on, reflecting off the road, off the snow, off everything as it pulls into traffic and starts the journey to Johns Hopkins. Hannibal follows, as he must.

But the clean lines of the emergency vehicle blur. The lights become hazy, watercolor things that consume his vision in shades of piercing red and white. They look like blood spilled on the roadway. As he passes beneath a highway light, it's the same color of the gouges Will clawed into his flesh when he begged Hannibal not to let go.

He tells himself there's no reason for this—that the feeling he has should be relief, and not some twisted amalgam of aborted grief. What reason is there to grieve when Will is alive? He's alive. He's *alive.*

But with an infinite span of universes all crammed into this empty space around him, the realization lingers that Will might not have been.

There's no good reason for it, but for the terrible rage and fear over what could've happened. But with the passenger seat vacant in the corner of his eye, that's reason and reminder enough.

Hannibal wipes the tears from his eyes as he drives.

He's at Will's side the moment he comes out of the ambulance and is taken over by Johns Hopkins staff. He sees to it that Will's brought for scans immediately, and doesn't leave his side for the entirety of the ordeal.

Hannibal holds his hand at every viable moment.

The results, though, take time. As Will is in no immediate danger, he's transferred to a private room not far from the emergency department, moved carefully to a proper hospital bed. From the moment the nurses leave, Will's bleary, pleading eyes turn to him, and Hannibal could never refuse.

When they return, Hannibal is curled into what space remains in the bed that Will's body does not take, pressed along his side. His forehead touches Will's bruised and scraped temple, palm splayed over his abdomen, feeling the rise and fall of Will's breath.

A figure pauses at the threshold. Her eyes, wide and dark and soft, linger on the sight of them together. "Doctor Lecter?"

Hannibal doesn't move. He can't. Won't. "Come in, Bernadette."

She does, though slowly. Hesitantly, like this room is not her domain; like she's intruding in a place that she's not welcome. To some extent, outside the realm of necessity, that's true. But within the bounds of what Hannibal realizes must be done, he looks at her. Will is cradled by his body, head lolling onto his shoulder in a drifting doze that is not quite sleep—short of it, as Hannibal has denied him that relief until they can be sure Will isn't severely concussed. That his beautiful mind is whole and undamaged, and will not swell within its shell of bone to such a point that Will would pass into sleep and never wake up.

No—Will has persevered thus far. Hannibal simply refuses to lose him now.

"What did they find?"

"Well, no broken bones," Bernadette says with a heaving sigh. "Really lucky. Really, really lucky. And despite the loss of consciousness, we're not seeing any major swelling in the brain, but you'll have to keep an eye on him. Onset can happen up to twenty-four hours from impact."

Will's fingers curl in his sleeve. He says nothing, but when Hannibal glances down, there is a subtle, complicated expression set onto his face. He opens his mouth, then closes it again. Hannibal gives him a querying look, but Will shakes his head. The matter drops—for now.

"You're gonna have some bruising on your chest because of the seat belt," she continues apologetically. "But it's a damn good thing you were wearing one. And if you arms stay sore, you can take painkillers like tylenol, but stay away from aspirin and ibuprofen which can make any bleeding worse and cause trouble, even if we didn't see it on the scans. It can make microbleeds a whole lot bigger, and that's not what you want."

Hannibal nods in acknowledgement, despite the words being directed at Will. He turns to his beloved, the tip of his nose pressed against skin that is clammy and cool. Hannibal's fingers tighten on Will's belly; he gets a quiet, pained sound for his trouble, and gentles his grip immediately. "How are you feeling?"

"Tired," Will whispers. His eyes are half-lidded. "A little nauseous, but I haven't eaten since lunch."

"Then we'll get you home and fed," Hannibal replies. "Bernadette, can you start the discharge paperwork, please?"

"Right away, Doctor Lecter." Her smile is small, her expression wistful and sympathetic. She goes.

And it's no sooner that she's over the threshold that Will's fingers curl around his wrist. Will lifts his head, expression deeply exhausted, the dark makeup-smudged circles under his eyes exacerbating the lines of his face. "I need that chart to say I have a concussion. Without a cognitively impairing medical reason, I'll be expected to take my finals tomorrow. And I just…" Will's voice cracks. He looks down, away, like it's a shameful thing. "I can't. Hannibal, I can't. I need—"

Hannibal shushes him with a breath, with a kiss to the top of his head, to his cheek. Hannibal is moving before the words have even entirely left Will's lungs, and though every instinct is railing against him, demanding he return to Will instead of leave him, he knows what he has to do. And he knows that if he can catch Bernadette before the chart coding is finished… "I'll see it done. Give me a moment, I'll be right back."

A bereft sound. Will's hands clutch at the rails of the hospital bed, his face damp, expression drawn. He looks pained, but he doesn't beg, though he seems like he might desperately want to. "I—okay." He swallows hard. "Okay."

It wrenches at his guts to tear himself away. The air feels colder once Will's no longer in his sight. It sets his teeth on edge as he's surrounded by the sights and scents of the Emergency Room; iodine, antiseptic, the adhesive of generic bandages. The plastic scent of sterile gloves. Blood.

He slips through the halls on quick feet, chasing a familiar face. He finds her at the nurse's station. "Bernadette."

Her head snaps up. "Hey, Doc, everything okay?"

Hannibal presses his lips together. He glances down the hallway and steps into the otherwise-vacant nurse's station; sits across from her in a rolling chair. "Actually, I have a favor to ask of you, if you will."

She tilts her head; curious eyes. She doesn't confirm right away, which nearly makes him smile. She's a smart young woman.

He continues, hushed, "I'll admit that perhaps I'm overly cautious, but Will's nausea and exhaustion may present as a symptom of a Grade One concussion. However, he's… not coping well with the trauma of his accident. I'm confident in my ability to care for him at home, but in the event that I need to write him a prescription…"

Her shoulders relax. Her expression gentles with understanding. "Yeah, of course. Honestly, I didn't agree with Radiology entirely on that one. An accident like that—it would be crazy to come out with nothing, especially considering how long he lost consciousness." She huffs a sigh through her nose. "I'll list him as a Grade One. If you need any scripts, just shoot me a text when you've sent them over and I'll make sure they get filled right away."

Hannibal nods; he makes to get up, but doesn't quite manage before he hears another sigh, before Bernadette reaches over and rests her open hand on his forearm.

"What about you?" She asks. "Are you holding up okay?"

Yes, he means to say. *Everything is better now that I know he's safe.*

But what comes out is, "I thought I'd lost him."

Later, he'll rationalize it as the confession of any normal man faced with the fear of mortality—not his own, but of one he loves. It's a blindingly simple thing. So understandable to any and every common person that walks the Earth and loves another, to know that fear intimately. It's relatable.

But Hannibal is not a common man. He has never considered himself so—except, it seems, in this.

"And that's terrifying," Bernadette says simply, not overly patronizing or simpering. Just acknowledging. "But you didn't. He's alright, and so are you. And I'm gonna finish up this chart and get you both out of here so you can go home. Okay?"

Hannibal inhales. He lowers his head. For just a moment, he allows his hand to rest over the back of hers as he accepts her soothing gesture, if only to make her feel better. Even if it soothes nothing of the raw, ravaged void of chaos and uncertainty that rages inside him. "Thank you, Bernadette. I should get back."

She nods. "Of course. See you in a few."

Nothing can placate him but the warmth of Will's body, the beat of his heart. It feels hollow to suggest anything else could bridge that chasm of utter inhumanity.

The suit of niceties and propriety that holds him together is shredding. Unraveling. Strings pulling apart that are made not of textile, but flesh and fur, sinew and gut. Beneath its coverings is a body made of bone and teeth and claws, monstrous in nature.

Inside him, it howls a name.

Hannibal stalks the hallways on a single-minded mission to return to his beloved. Will is, and somehow seems to have always been, the reason for his chaotic state, and the reason for his continued peace.

The lingering thought of life without him is—

But Hannibal is not without him. He will never be without him.

"Darling—"

But when Hannibal rounds the corner, it's to the irritating realization that, once again, they are not alone. However, the culprit for that breach is swiftly acknowledged and identified.

Margot Verger sits on the end of Will's bed. Her eyes are red, her hand clutched around Will's. She looks up when Hannibal darkens the doorway, and Will's bleary stare redirects. He takes a second to focus.

No concussion? Hannibal would be a fool to believe that were true. Now more than ever he's glad he sought out Bernadette to adjust Will's paperwork. If his symptoms should worsen, Will may need an anti-nausea medication to help him weather the worst of the spinning vertigo that can come with a brain desperately trying to deal with its own injury. The aftermath of a concussion is not so unlike shaking a bottle of champagne and watching the pressure build until it bursts, if only the carbonation were sentient.

"I got here as soon as I could," Margot says. Her voice cracks.

"I'm glad you're here," Hannibal lies. In truth, her presence here and now places him on edge when his every instinct screams to secure this place, secure his mate. An animal, reduced to impulse, and she's intruding on his den. His territory. "Though, I'll be taking Will home as soon as I'm able." He cannot find the presence of mind to sound apologetic for that. "But you're more than welcome to visit once he's rested and is medically sound."

"I'm medically sound," Will mumbles.

"No, you're not," Margot counters. It lowers Hannibal's hackles, to some degree. "You're a mess, hon. You're." She swallows. "I just needed to see you, alright? You take all the time you need."

Hannibal comes to the bed, sits at Will's side. Their hips press together, separated only by thin hospital cotton. Hannibal wants to take him home more than he wants almost anything. He wants to clean the scent of blood from Will's body. Wrap him in warmth. Lie with him, skin to skin. "I'll be contacting my supervisor in the morning to take some time off. I'm overdue to use my vacation time."

"You don't have to." Will reaches for him; his fingers slip uselessly over Hannibal's thighs, catching only on the wrinkles in his suit pants. "I'll be fine."

“With careful treatment, yes, I believe that may be true.” Hannibal’s eyes narrow on Will. He looks so small, so tired. Hannibal despises that. He should be free, unbound, unburdened. Triumphant, exalted —always. “I’m taking at least the next forty-eight hours to care for you.”

“Hannibal,” he says, weak and unhappy.

“Darling, there’s much to deal with. We have to correspond with your remaining professors, as well as have your car collected and assessed. All the while, you need to rest as much as you’re able. The more you stress your mind, the slower your recovery will be.”

Will rolls toward him, his head hangs heavily on his neck, sinking into the pillow. His eyes don’t quite meet Hannibal’s. “My car’s fucked.”

It’s said in a breath, but Hannibal can hear all the words Will’s too tired to say—it was old, the value had already depreciated that any major damage would have inevitably deemed it totaled, and now it’s in pieces. The insurance company will deny his repair claim, cash him out for whatever paltry amount they decide his vehicle was worth at the end. For whatever time it takes to get that sorted, Will won’t have access to a car.

“You can use mine.” Margot nods once, decided, even as Will turns his hazy-yet-horrified eyes to her. “We’ve got enough cars. You already know how to drive it.”

“I’m not driving your fine-tuned hundred-thousand-dollar coupe in and out of Wolf Trap.” Will makes a small, pained sound as he rubs at his face, overwhelmed.

“Why not? I do it all the time.” She lifts and drops a shoulder, as casual as only one with a great sum of money and no cause for any financially-motivated concern could be. She turns her smile to Hannibal. “I’ll come visit in a few days and drop it off. I’ll have Alana pick me up.”

“That’s very generous of you, Margot, thank you.”

Margot smiles at Will. Reaches for him. Places her hand on his knee, and stares at him for a while without saying anything. The humor in her eyes fades into something stony, shuttered. But whatever expression it is that she pins him with, Will returns in an even, unfaltering stare.

Strength, even in the face of this weakness.

Whatever is passing between them in this moment is some… *energy* that Hannibal himself is now made an outsider to. He finds he despises the feeling.

“This is for the best, Will,” Margot says softly. “You know I don’t think you’re a charity case. You’re my best friend. Just let me help however I can. I know you’d do the same for me.”

There’s a spark in Will’s eyes. He exhales through his nose. “Fine.” He rests his hand over hers. “But you’re taking it back. Don’t think you’re gonna just drop it off and forget about it.”

Margot presses her lips together. With a frisson of distant humor, Hannibal realizes that may have very well been exactly what she intended to do. It eases the knot of twisted feelings inside him, and he looks up when Bernadette crosses the threshold once more.

Her brow creases at the sight of Margot; pins Hannibal with an exasperated look. “Will should be resting, not visiting.”

“I assure you, he’ll get plenty of rest at home.” Hannibal takes the discharge instructions and mandatory post-concussion care sheet she hands him; folds them, and puts them in the inner pocket of his coat. “Thank you for your haste.”

Bernadette still looks unimpressed, but she sighs through her nose. “Well, no one wants to be caught at the ER for eight hours. Cutting it down to two was the least I could do.”

Hannibal nods once. He turns his attention to Will; smooths a hand over his shoulder and watches Will sag into his touch. “Do you feel up to walking, or shall I collect a wheelchair?”

Will’s eyes sharpen at the word, lip curling with derision. He pushes at the thin blankets that cover him. “No, I can…”

But he stops at the opposite edge of the bed. His feet are bare against the floor; his eyes close, and he sways in place. Margot grips him by the shoulders.

“No, you can’t,” she says. “Quit being so damn stubborn and let us help you.”

“I’m *fine,”* Will murmurs.

He is decidedly not fine, and the complicated horror of it claws at Hannibal’s throat. Wordlessly, he stalks from the room and finds a wheelchair tucked, unused, into a corner; returns it to Will’s room just in time to see Margot helping him roll his elastic leggings up over his knees and thighs, Will wiggling into them in half-hearted movements that barely lift his hips enough to get them seated. The sweater, for its part, goes on much easier, and Will ducks his cheek to the collar of it. That strong expression flickers, falters, crumbles for just a moment, and Hannibal cannot bear to watch him cry a second time and be able to do nothing about it.

“Let me,” he says, and Margot steps away readily.

Will reaches for him. Will always reaches for him. And it’s only the weight of his body against Hannibal’s, having him on his feet and in his arms for the first time since this happened that soothes him. Feeling Will’s arms wrap around his neck, face tucked into his throat. Feeling the slim and delicate curve of his waist as Hannibal embraces him tight enough it surely hurts them both.

He knows it hurts. It must. But Will only holds him tighter in turn, and it’s enough to make the screaming inside him go finally and blessedly quiet.

Will smells like the hospital. Beneath it, like motor oil and dry blood that has not yet started to decay. But his wild hair is soft against Hannibal’s cheek, and though his hands shoved beneath the back of Hannibal’s collar are cold, they are alive.

Will takes a gasping breath, and Hannibal turns his cheek against Will’s head, and there behind his ear is the bite Hannibal gave him. He tucks his chin and sets his mouth against it, holds Will as close as he dares and kisses over the scar-red gouges of his teeth.

“The faster I can get you out of this hospital right now, the better for my sanity it will be.” Hannibal murmurs against his skin. “Let me take you home, Will. Let me take care of you.”

Will’s fingernails sink into the nape of Hannibal’s neck.

He nods.

“Sit,” Hannibal commands him gently, and he does.

Will holds Hannibal's hand from the moment he starts the car. He grips the door with the other.

His knuckles are white. He shakes.

The drive from Johns Hopkins isn't far, but every breath of it burns Hannibal's lungs, every heartbeat squeezes like a vise until they are in the garage, until he kills the engine, until he is out of the car and around the passenger side, scooping Will into his arms and kicking the door closed as he carries Will inside, upstairs, *home.*

He runs them a bath, knowing that Will is all but asleep on his feet, and that the hot water will ease the strain in his muscles enough that, with the help of a muscle relaxant, Will might rest tonight without pain.

Hannibal is on auto-pilot. He senses there's no shame in admitting it to himself, so he does. He is simply going through the motions of humanity, doing what he knows intellectually must be done.

He kneels on the bathroom floor as the tub fills. He drags the elastic leggings back down Will's legs. He kisses every dawning bruise, every cut and scrape. His mouth lingers on the hot softness of Will's inner thigh; exhales sharply when Will's fingers push into his hair and cradle the back of his skull.

He closes his eyes. Inhales the scent of skin.

Will.

Hannibal stands. Strips, perfunctory and clinical. He gets into the bath, and as the water raises around his body, Will reaches for him. Hannibal lifts him into the water, into his lap, and just… *holds.*

It's silent. The lights feel too harsh, shining into the cracks and crevices of Hannibal's self that he's not sure he's ever wanted anyone to see. And Will sees them, he knows, because his touch is slow, he allows Hannibal to support the weight of him. Knows it's necessary, in this moment. And his breathing, soft and even, washes across Hannibal's skin in waves as warm as the water around them.

Will puts his cheek against Hannibal's shoulder. He kisses the scar he left there.

Hannibal's palm molds to the nape of Will's neck, holds his eyes, and Will nods. Allows the gentle, reverent touch of Hannibal's hands over his arms and back and chest. His eyes drift closed when Hannibal frees the elastic from Will's hair and wets it, washes it. The suds pinken with the tinge of Will's blood. They stain the water around them, and after some time, even Hannibal cannot bear the evidence of how close they came to—

He can't think about it. He rinses Will's hair with clean, hot water from the tap, and pulls the plug from the bottom of the tub.

He wraps Will in the largest towel he owns, plush and soft around his aching body; Will sits on the edge of the raised pedestal and watches as Hannibal dries himself, simply waiting until Hannibal returns to him. Pats dry the droplets that cling to his body. Wraps and squeezes the excess from the lengths of Will's hair, and watches when Will smooths conditioner into the ends.

He braids it with shaking fingers. Hannibal's not sure that he's ever seen Will braid his hair before, and follows when Will finds a clean, dry towel and carries it in his hands to bed, careless of his nudity.

The lights stay off. Hannibal goes to adjust the thermostat as Will crawls onto the mattress, and his shoulders tremble with the strain of his arms keeping him upright. Hannibal returns to his side as Will pushes most of the pillows up toward the headboard of his king-sized bed, but grabs Hannibal's and drags it to the center of the mattress. Just one. Will slips beneath the covers and lies on his back and reaches, and when Hannibal climbs in to join him—

Will cradles his face in his hands, dark-eyed and wordless. And he guides Hannibal closer, tucked around his side just as they lay together at the hospital, but…

Will pulls Hannibal's head to his chest. Just shy of the bruise his seat belt left.

Against Hannibal's ear is the sound of Will's heart.

It's a strange thing, to be the one held instead of the one doing the holding. But Will's fingers run through his hair, trail down the back of his neck, and Hannibal can do nothing, *nothing* but this.

He tangles their legs. Tucks his arm around Will's waist. He holds on.

Counts the pulses against his ear, the proof of Will's life.

Against Hannibal's intentions, his eyes close. Behind closed lids, they burn.

There is a road, dark and empty. He stands on it alone, bare-footed. No coat. He knows where he is going, but he moves so slowly. In the air echoes a distorted, repetitive sound, grating in nature. It cuts through the silent night over and over.

He blinks, and he is somewhere else—standing at the edge of a deep, dark abyss. At the bottom is a twisted shape of metal. At the bottom is a sea of blood.

When he slides over the edge, jagged shards cut his feet, but he doesn't feel pain. He continues regardless. Inside the wreckage of the vehicle, there is nothing. No body. No sign of Will at all.

Lights arrive like daybreak over the ridge, red and blue and white. Spotlights blind him. He is a creature, no longer human; his heart pounds within a skeletal chest, and his fangs ache with the desire to quench his starvation, his thirst.

Is Will gone? Or was he never there at all?

Has this all been a dream?

Freeze! the officers on the ridge scream, barely audible over the sound that permeates the night, and though their bullets rip through his torso, they do not stop him. What life is there, now, if he is alone? What reason does he have to be cautious, to be smart, when he can simply be monstrous without consequence?

Hannibal's flesh is in tatters by the time he ascends the ridge, hanging in ribbons from the bone.

He slaughters everything, howls his grief in a dissonant harmony to the sound of an ever-ringing phone, and the pavement runs red until the blood overflows the banks and he drowns in it.

He snaps awake in the dark; comes alive in an instant and strikes out at the weight that holds him down—

"Hannibal, Hannibal. Shh—"

Hands touch his face, his hair, his chest. In the night there is a sound, shuddering breath. Not scared, no. Startled.

"It's okay, you were dreaming—"

He realizes. *"Will."*

"Yeah, I'm right here." Will finds his hand, his curled fingers and clawing nails, and pulls it to his sternum. His heart thrums like a rabbit's run beneath Hannibal's fingers. His eyes are wide, fast-blinking. He swallows. "You were having a nightmare."

A nightmare?

Hannibal lowers himself onto his side. He can still feel the rush of adrenaline in his limbs, the dream hazy and indistinct in his mind. Tinged with fear and anger, dread and desolation. His fingers curl around Will's ribs; the skin there is hot, flooded with blood beneath the surface. He lowers his cheek until it touches Will's shoulder, until Will rolls to face him and pulls him close, enfolding Hannibal in his arms.

It's warm and soft and smells like love, like home.

"I haven't had a nightmare since I was a child," Hannibal confesses into the dark space Will's body creates around him.

"Do you remember it?" Will asks.

Hannibal exhales gently through his nose. He says, "I believe I was still looking for you. All I could hear was the sound of the phone."

"Phone?" Will's hands tighten on his back; sharp, bright pinpoints of pain. "I… I think I remember that, maybe. Did you call me?"

"Continuously." The ringing echoes inside his head, compounded with the memory of its horrendous overtone. How it hung heavily in the air like smog, vibrating his bones, permeating every breath with

the bitter taste of his own failure. “From the time your call cut out until I arrived on the scene.”

A quiet sound—Will licks his lips. Hannibal wonders if they’re dry, cracked with dehydration. He should have demanded the hospital give Will more fluids.

“Why?”

Because it was the only thing he could come up with at the time. The only signal he could put out, solely in the hope that something would change, the shattered hopes he found himself among might gather themselves together. That Will would answer like nothing was wrong, even though Hannibal knew it wasn’t true.

Why?

“It wasn’t a matter of thought, but of emotion. I believed… I *hoped…”*

His arms tighten around Will’s body. When he touches his forehead to Will’s throat, he can feel the pounding of his pulse against his cheek.

Will’s hands flatten on his back. One pets down. The other skims up, tangles in his hair. Holds him. Caresses him. “You hoped…?”

“You must understand, the whole way I went to finding you, not knowing where you were, I didn't hear the sounds of the road or the radio. I could only keep calling you, over and over. And it would go to voicemail, and I would hear a recording of your voice that was not actually your voice, and I would hang up. Then I’d call again.” Hannibal closes his eyes and hemorrhages his honesty; a bleeding heart. “I know it's not rational, or reasonable, nor would it have helped in any way. But I suppose I was… thinking, if I was thinking at all… that if I kept calling, even if you couldn’t reach your phone, you might hear it ring. That you would know that I was still trying—and that I would never rest until I found you.”

A breath—it could have been either of theirs. But then Will swallows hard and pulls Hannibal close. Cups the back of his skull. Slips one slender leg between his knees, and just like that, Hannibal is enveloped by the enormity of Will Graham’s continued existence, and what he almost lost.

“You found me,” Will whispers. His voice cracks. “You found me, baby. You brought me home.”

Hannibal clutches him tightly. Yes, he did, didn’t he? For every terrible feeling of tonight, it ended in victory. Will is here. Will is home.

But… “Will, the other car—”

“What other car?”

Hannibal stays very still. Will’s voice is… empty. Devoid of memory, but, too, devoid of the terror and the fury he’d had in the last moments of that accursed phone call.

No. The cause has to be sussed out. Whoever did this—“Just before… the call cut out,” Hannibal says carefully. “You mentioned another vehicle.”

Will exhales. “I…” Hannibal can hear his frown, feel it in the strange shift Will does within his arms. The way his hand tightens and loosens around the nape of Hannibal’s neck, grasping at straws beyond his reach. “I don’t remember.”

No. He *has* to know. “Think carefully—”

“Please don’t be mad at me,” Will says. His voice is edged with panic, arms and legs curling, tightening, Will’s cheek pressed tight to the top of Hannibal’s head as he shudders. Shivers. “Please. I just… I don’t know. And I don’t want to—I just—I *can’t.* Think. Not tonight. Please, I—”

He’s panicking. Hannibal’s frustration is stayed by the immediate desire to find Will’s fear and crush it.

He rubs his palms over Will’s back, shoulders to hips. Slow, concentric circles. “Shh, my love. That’s alright. That’s quite alright, darling. Take a deep breath for me, Will.”

He doesn’t. “I’m sorry—”

“Hush, Will,” Hannibal murmurs. The taste of his anger is acrid in his throat, given no direction. He must swallow it down, a hot coal to stoke within his belly until it smolders. Until it smokes and is given fuel to burn. “Don’t apologize, darling. Don’t be afraid or angry. Just breathe with me.”

It takes time. But Will’s shivering mellows, his breaths smooth out, and in time, their chests rise and fall together. Will’s trembling limbs go still. His body is soft and lax with bruised sweetness, like an overripe fruit. Inflammation and heat, just on the edge of fever.

“How do you feel?”

“Tired.” Will’s whisper is barely an exhale, a breathy sigh. “I’m so tired.”

“Did you sleep at all?” Hannibal asks softly. “Before I woke.”

“No. I was just… enjoying. Holding you. And being with you. And trying not to think about anything else.”

Hannibal sighs. He lifts his head, and in the dark, their eyes meet. “What can I do, my love? How can I help you?”

Will touches his cheek. Then leans down, and touches Hannibal’s lips with his lips, a chaste caress that carries within it more vulnerability than Will can speak aloud.

He tugs, and Hannibal scoots up until their heads rest on the same pillow. When he turns, Hannibal fills the space at his back. Fills every empty inch of space between them.

He kisses the side of Will’s throat. The mark of his own teeth.

“Stay with me, no matter what happens. No matter how crazy things get. I—” Will’s voice breaks. His body jerks, just once, a near-sob, a choked breath. “In sickness and in health, right? For better or for worse.”

Hannibal’s arm folds around him; his palm rests against Will’s heart. And though part of him will always wonder how it would taste, and will long to feel it undulate in his naked palm, he so much more strongly desires Will just like this. Just like right now, always.

But that will require change, so what happened tonight never happens again. So that no one may question the strength of Hannibal’s love, or his claim to Will’s life.

“As long as we both shall live, mylimasis. I’ll make it so.”

“When?” Will asks. Near-demands.

Hannibal smiles; he can’t not. “As soon as I can do it properly.”

“I don’t care about proper.”

“I know you don’t.” He touches his cheek to Will’s pulse. “In truth, nor do I. But I want you whole and well. Sound of mind and body.”

Will snorts, a quiet, derisive thing. Oh, Hannibal loves him for it. “How long will that take?”

“In truth? Too long.” Will’s heart speeds beneath his palm. Hannibal’s races to match. “I’m secure in the knowledge that I am yours and you are mine. But if I could definitively inform the rest of the world, I would. I’ll build a monument to our union, if I must.”

Will’s arm lifts from the bed, and he rests his hand over Hannibal’s, over his own heart. Their fingers tangle. He whispers, “I bet it’d be beautiful.”

Hannibal closes his eyes. He kisses the back of Will’s head, that gorgeous mind.

What Will wants, Will shall receive.

A proposal. Hannibal’s mind races with possibility.

And finally, *finally* he’ll see.

“Hannibal?”

“Yes, darling.”

A long moment of silence. But when Will speaks, his voice shakes. Breaks. And he ducks his head, touches his mouth to the hands held over his heart. “I love you so—so much, alright? I really. I just. Love you. I love you. If I never got to say it or see you again—”

Hannibal’s arms tighten around him until he hears Will’s breath catch with pain. But he feels Will’s nails dig into his arms, clutching him closer, closer, closer, so Hannibal doesn’t relent. He can’t. “My Will. My Willa. My dearest love,” he rasps through the thickness in his throat, and Will sobs. “I will always come for you, wherever you are. I will always find you, beloved, I promise. I promise.”

The salted scent of Will’s tears overwhelms all else. They bead on his lashes, slip over his cheeks, drip between their fingers; their entangled, abraded hands. They are both marked by tonight, inside and out—

And Hannibal, too, weeps.

3:16

Chapter Notes

Hi all!! Long time no see! My move (Pt. 1) is complete, which means I suddenly have a lot more time to have a life! Exciting stuff, and just in time for what I believe to be the most exciting part of Headlines. :D I'll be replying to everyone in short accord, I swear; your comments have kept me going while I've been packing and moving and moving and packing (again).

Talking to bae @HigherMagic the other night made me realize how... really close we are to the finish. Maybe five chapters? Six? It'll depend how far it gets away from me, but if I have anything to say about it, this fic will be done well before the end of the summer. :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will lies in the dark for a long time after Hannibal has fallen back asleep.

His head hurts. His eyes hurt. His chest hurts. His heart hurts.

It's such a simple lie to say he doesn't remember. Better for Hannibal, in the long run, if he believes Will doesn't remember the sensation of his car sliding as he attempted to pull over. If he doesn't remember crashing through the guard rail, rolling down the incline and hearing the sound of shattering glass and thinking, *I might die here.*

It's better for everyone if Hannibal doesn't know that Will knows a *lot* of things.

Will knows exactly who did this to him.

Was it Mason? Margot's simple question as she entered the hospital room, as she sat at his side and reached for his hand. No hello. No words of relief to see him alive. There is no relief. There won't be, until the source of their torment is gone. Only then will they begin to heal.

Will had squeezed her hand and said, *Yeah.*

And every time he closes his eyes, he sees the rusted grill of that shitty old farm truck. He feels it as it herds him to the edge, and just when Will tried to pull onto the shoulder, it accelerated. Side-swiped him. Just enough for him to instinctively jerk the wheel, for his car to slip, and to plunge into Hell.

Will knew before he went over the edge. Will knew when he woke up.

And Will knew he couldn't tell.

Avoiding major injury was a miracle. Any lasting wound would have ground his plan to a halt. Fortunately, he was lucky. Damn lucky.

And Will won't leave it up to luck when it comes time to retaliate.

Mason will undoubtedly hear of Will's survival, of his supposed concussion. Will can think of a few other manufactured maladies that won't be hard to convince him of. All he needs is a bug in Mason's ear. All he needs is to be underestimated.

But for now…

Will exhales, and Hannibal's arms shift around him. There's no denying he'll need recovery time. There's no denying what happened.

He almost died. And if he had, Hannibal never would have known the truth.

The time is growing near—the golden thread of the Fates weaving a tapestry upon their hallowed loom. The picture they make is becoming clearer to those who know what to look for. With time, left unchecked, everyone will see reality for what it is:

A spider's web. At the center, a lovely little black widow spinning flies in swaths of silk.

The time for truth is coming, but only once Will's work is completed. It'll be—

"Soon," Will murmurs, and ducks his chin to brush his lips across the back of Hannibal's hand, to soothe the claw marks he himself left in his panic. In his terror. Weakness.

But after every caterpillar emerges from the chrysalis, the butterfly must have time to dry its wings before it can take flight. Those moments are its most vulnerable. These are Will's.

So he allows himself to be vulnerable. To shake. To sink into Hannibal's arms, to close his eyes, and pretend he is the kind of person who would allow another to protect him, solve his problems for him. No matter how he appears to the outside world, he's never been that person.

Tonight, though, he can allow himself to dream of it. And in a day or two, when the worst has passed, when his wounds are patched and his wings are dried, he will take flight. Ascend. Become.

And Hell will come with him.

The next few days pass in a slow, lazy haze. Will floats on muscle relaxants and painkillers and the ache of his body when Hannibal massages the knots from his back and neck. He soaks in the tub often. He sleeps often. Hannibal is almost annoyingly attentive to Will's food and water consumption; he never would have taken Hannibal to be a nag, but perhaps there was some truth to his insistence about doctors being overly-mindful of safety. At the very least, Will's safety. Will gets the idea that Hannibal would probably have left anyone else to rot, if his no-nonsense call to Mr. Merle is anything to go by.

I've had a family emergency and will be taking the next two days off. My shift will have to be covered by another surgeon. No, I'm afraid everything is not alright. You may have heard Willa was in an

accident last night—yes, thank you. Yes, Thursday evening should be fine. Yes, they were very lucky. Very, very lucky. Mr. Mer—Mr. Merle, I have to go, I'm needed—thank you. Goodbye.

For all his urgency on the phone, one would not have thought Hannibal was returning to Will in the living room, the both of them sprawled on the couch for Will to doze while Hannibal binged more Chef's Table, but that's neither here nor there. The feeling of fingers stroking through his hair is hypnotic, and whether or not Will *technically* ended up with a concussion is moot when Hannibal is just as dedicated to keeping him relaxed and his mind off anything important. With his hands… and his mouth, and whatever else comes to *his* mind, taking Will apart one reverent kiss and cresting orgasm at a time.

This is a different kind of spoiling than Will is used to—but he could get used to it.

It's… sweet. Slow. So different from the frantic edge their coupling has always taken in the past, and when Hannibal meets his eyes in the aftermath, Will can always see the words he has said aloud only once:

If you died, I would never be the same.

He hopes Hannibal never *has* to say them again, but the reality that he's *said* them permeates down to Will's very bones. Everything he wanted—making himself indispensable, a figure impossible to unwind from Hannibal's life, from his thoughts—it's all a reality. Much in the way that Hannibal laid himself into the foundation of Will's existence, Will has done the same to him.

He's more than hooked—for a dedicated fish can break the line or tear the barb from its cheek and survive. Some even live with the metal in their mouths for the rest of their lives as a cruel reminder… but they live.

Hannibal, though. Hannibal is speared, a steel harpoon through the chest. To tear Will free from him would leave nothing recognizable behind.

And with that realization comes another much more sobering, because if Will goes through with this plan, and if he fails…

If he fails, that wound would be his fault.

Then we won't fail, Wilhelmina whispers the next evening as Will lies curled on the couch, his cheek rested on a cushion as Hannibal fills the room with melody, the harmonious vibrations of classical music from a harpsichord's strings. Familiar songs that sound new simply due to the medium on which it's made.

He's a talented musician; swift and steady hands, perfect posture. Handsome to a fault, illuminated by firelight. Glowing.

He smiles when he plays. Will wonders if he's always done that, or if it's just because someone's watching him.

The song comes to an end. Hannibal's eyes as they find Will's are the same deep and warming red of bourbon—not so dissimilar from the glass set on the floor beside the bench, two finger-widths cooling within atop a wedge of ice. Hannibal leans down to reach for it. There are soft creases around his eyes that deepen with gentle joy when Will smiles back.

"What about that one?" Hannibal asks.

“I’m pretty sure it was Beethoven,” Will replies. “Beyond that, got me.”

Hannibal huffs through his nose. “Very good, Will—yes, it was Beethoven. Piano Sonata No. 8, Opus 13 in C minor. Often referred to as *Sonata Pathétique,* which means—”

“Passionate,” he murmurs.

Hannibal pauses; smiles. “Yes.”

“I like that one.” Will shuffles in place, tugs at the blanket that’s pulled up over his shoulders. He nestles in, ensconced in contented warmth. His lashes droop. The aches of his body are starting to subside, leaving only the heaviness of a good meal and the scents of a place his heart knows as home.

“It’s a favorite of mine as well.” Hannibal turns, head tilted attentively as he observes Will’s downward slide into the cushions. “You look half asleep. Would you rather move upstairs?”

Will shakes his head slightly. His eyes close, but do not re-open.

He feels Hannibal move from the way the air shifts, as he pushes Will’s bangs from his eyes and tucks a curl behind his ear, from the brush of lips against his forehead. Will tips his chin into it; receives him graciously in that reddish glow of a place that permeates his eyelids, even if they refuse to part.

“I’ll be back to normal soon,” Will mumbles. “Promise.”

“I’ll hold you to that promise,” Hannibal replies solemnly, and kisses the corner of Will’s mouth, chaste and tender.

Will noses at him blindly. His chest is full, fit to burst. “Play one more?”

“Of course.”

Hannibal’s thumb brushes his cheek bone, just below his eye. Will hums appreciatively. It’s just about all he can manage, but—“Love you.”

“I love you too, darling. More than you could ever know.”

The fullness in his chest blocks his throat. Chokes him. And when Hannibal rises, when he turns away to return to his seat at the harpsichord bench, Will cracks his eyes open for just one moment.

I do know, he doesn’t say to Hannibal’s silhouette.

Forgive me. But he doesn’t say that, either.

Will drifts with the sound of music more than two hundred years old, and hopes *their* passion, too, will survive long past the lifetimes of lesser men.

The time comes too soon for Hannibal to return to work, even if Will is spared from a return to real life. His finals are postponed until one week prior to the new semester; a fact that irritates him when he realizes he’ll have to keep refreshing the material and keep it in the forefront of his mind for the

coming month. But there's nothing for it; it's repeat the semester or agree to the adjusted schedule, and Will's not eager to stick around campus any longer than the one semester he has left.

If he makes it to next semester at all.

"Are you sure—"

Will tilts his head and pins Hannibal in place with a placid smile. Hannibal, to his credit, stops himself with a flare of his nostrils and sighs.

"Forgive me. I'm simply not looking forward to leaving you alone."

"I won't be alone," Will reminds him patiently. "Margot will be here any minute. She already agreed to spend the night. The pizza's in the oven—" Mediterranean vegetable, spinach, and feta with a balsamic drizzle (at Will's strategic insistence of keeping Margot free of Hannibal's… select cuts of meat) on a hand-made crust to suit Hannibal's sensibilities, "—and I have your pager number. *If,* for some Godforsaken reason, there's an emergency and I can't reach you, I'll page you and call 911. But we're gonna be fine. You'll probably be home before we even wake up."

It's an overnight shift, short by all accounts for the ER; six in the evening until six in the morning. Hannibal puts his tupperware into the insulated lunch bag; Will reaches out and snags the sleeve of his scrubs between his fingers and tugs him closer, rests his forearms on Hannibal's shoulders, tucks his shins against his sides, and leans down from his countertop seat for a kiss. Even now, part of him thrills knowing he can get away with it.

"There's no reason to worry," Will murmurs against his mouth. "Believe it or not, I've been injured before and got through it on my own. Now I have you and Margot to help me." He slides one hand into Hannibal's hair, free of product and unusually easy to mess up. He grins, and does just that. "But I'm a *grown-up*, baby, I promise I can handle it."

Hannibal gives him a wry look; sees Will's mischievous expression and answers it with a quiet huff of breath, both amused and exasperated. He catches Will's wandering hand when it reaches the back of his neck, before he can dip his fingers beneath the collar of Hannibal's scrubs and wander further. "It's not only worry on your behalf, darling. I've never left my home unattended with others in it."

Will arches a brow. Plays coy. "Well, I promise not to burn it down. At least on purpose."

Hannibal's lips tip upward, but there is a certain flatness to his eyes as he looks at Will that speaks to his true, concealed concerns. Of course, everything of note in this house is well-hidden…

…to those who don't know what they're looking for, or where to look.

Will pats his shoulders, gives him a nudge. Slouches. Smiles. Wheedles, "Or accidentally. We won't break your stuff or do anything crazy. We're probably just going to watch Netflix and play cards and talk shit. She'll ask me about our sex life, and I'll probably know more about hers and Alana's than I ever wanted to know by the time she comes to pick Margot up in the morning. It's really not going to be that exciting, I promise. If UMD had superlatives, I'd've been voted *Most Boring to Hang Out With."*

"That doesn't help your credibility, my dear, since I know that's categorically untrue."

Will grins. "Yeah, but you get to fuck me. Most don't. Overruled."

Hannibal arches a brow. "Most?"

“Most,” Will agrees teasingly, and snorts with laughter when Hannibal seizes him around the waist and lifts him down, soft sweater rucking up around his belly. “Careful, I’m damaged goods!”

“You’re insufferable, is what you are.” It’s a testament to his recovering state that Hannibal kisses him hard, teeth scraping at Will’s lower lip and dragging a moan from his lungs. He leans down when Will pushes up on his toes, slips his arms around Hannibal’s neck—

The doorbell rings. Will breaks away with a disappointed groan.

“Figures,” he mutters. “She has the worst timing.”

Hannibal nips at the apple of his cheek with a quiet little growl that makes Will’s stomach flutter. “Don’t be rude, darling. In my house, we’re gracious hosts to our guests.”

“Maybe she’s your guest, but she’s a *pain in my ass,”* Will grumbles. He breaks away with a knowing glance and a conciliatory pat to Hannibal’s chest, then heads for the front door. “I’m coming, I’m coming.”

As though she’s heard him, in retaliation, the first thing she does once she’s over the threshold is to push the Lexus’ keyless fob into Will’s hand. She shakes her head and er hair flows like a mane, a flurry of curls and flakes shaken out from the fine snow outside. She slips out of her coat, and like she’s been here a hundred times before, searches out the nearly-invisible closet and goes to hang it up, and to place her bag within it.

“I just remembered there’s a set of my riding clothes in the trunk—I don’t need them, and they’re clean, but feel free to move them if they’re in your way. Otherwise I’ll just take them back when you get a new car.” She turns, puts her hands on her hips, and surveys the foyer. “Huh. That art-deco-gothic thing was spot on.”

Will’s lips tilt upward, amused. “Yeah, you have no idea.”

Margot huffs. Then she turns her eyes to Will. She smiles, and her shoulders relax. “It’s really good to see you on your feet. Where’s your doctor?”

Hannibal appears in the doorway to the kitchen looking terribly amused. “Good evening, Ms. Verger. Thank you for coming to stay with Will while I’m at work.”

“Like you could get rid of me. Hey.”

Will’s brows creep up as Margot marches forward and throws her arms around Hannibal’s middle. Hannibal, for his part, blinks his bemusement. Then, like hugging is a long-forgotten memory, instead of the reality—he embraces Will whenever the desire strikes, which is often—his arms come around her loosely. One hand touches her back in an awkward little *pat pat* gesture that forces Will to hide a smile behind his hand.

Margot pulls away in due time. Her jaw is set, eyes lit with stubbornness when she nods, just once, and says, “Didn’t get to say thanks for finding him and keeping him alive. And helping me a few weeks ago. Lots of things. You were overdue.”

Hannibal’s arms don’t tighten, but something around his eyes tightens, even as the tension in his shoulders loosens. “You’re quite welcome.”

Margot takes a long, silent breath. Then, without further ado, she nods. “And now that that’s done, something smells awesome.”

“That’s the pizza,” Will replies, and slips the key fob into the pocket of his jeans. “Should be almost done.”

“Thank God, I’m starving.”

Will smiles at Hannibal as he passes by, leading Margot into the kitchen. Hannibal follows dutifully, retaking his place near the sink to finish preparing his lunch bag with adequate quick bites and protein bars and, of course, a home cooked meal reminiscent of beef merlot. Will knows with some certainty, judging by the color and the scent while it was cooking, it is not beef, not quite—though Will is sure one might call the livestock that provided it a cow, if one were so inclined.

Will nudges his cheek against Hannibal’s shoulder, leans against him idly. “Got everything?”

“I believe so.” Hannibal turns, and his hands settle on Will’s hips. He offers a flicker of a smile. “And you? Is there anything else before I go?”

Will shakes his head. Tilts his chin to accept a chaste but lingering kiss, and when Hannibal breaks away, his eyes are steady on Will’s face. Assessing.

Will gazes back, placid to a fault. Says nothing, gives nothing, indicates nothing. Attentive, but not too attentive. Pleased but expectant, as though he doesn’t know exactly what’s going through his beloved monster’s mind. He can feel the smile frozen on his face from the inside, the shuttered warmth in his own eyes as he bites back the intrigue at what he knows is not even a room away, hidden beneath the fine wooden floors.

Soon enough.

Will sidles away when the oven buzzes, comfortably rifling through a cabinet for oven mitts. He slips the pizza onto a cutting board; Margot *oooh*s her approval as Will swirls a spoon in the reduction pot on the cooktop and drizzles it over the rest.

Hannibal peers over his shoulder. “That looks as though it turned out well.”

“I’ll let you know once I eat it,” Will says with a grin. He hands the spoon to Margot, who daintily taps the tip of her pinky to the convex side and tastes the sauce, while he fetches a pair of plates from the counter. “Maybe one of these nights I’ll make dinner for *you.* That seems the next logical step in this relationship.”

Hannibal huffs a laugh as he collects the bag. “You’ve cooked me dinner before.”

Will turns his cheeky smile to Hannibal and crushes smug glee between his fangs. “Not in your kitchen. You have a whole lot more ingredients.”

It’s not a falter so much as a split-second pause in Hannibal’s movements that just as quickly resumes. He scans the room one last time, and in his resistance to meeting Will’s eyes, he sees Hannibal’s own delight, just as carefully bitten back, battered down into submission. Such a simple request would have no logical reason to make him so eager.

If only he knew.

“Everything reasonable a man could wish for, or so I pride myself upon,” he replies idly. “And then some things not so reasonable.”

Clever bastard.

“What is life without indulgence?” Margot asks with a quirk of her brow. “Literally, figuratively. When you think about it that way, the unreasonable becomes reasonable. What we do, what we eat. The only limit is what you make it.”

Hannibal’s eyes sharpen, but Margot carries on without pausing, unknowing of the irony of saying those words, here, to *him.* Will nods along decisively, like such a thing is an absent but agreeable thought, and hands her a knife.

“It’s all about perception. Lobster used to be a food others reviled. *Bottom-feeders,* only fit for prisoners, who considered it cruel and unusual punishment,” Will says mildly. “Now it’s considered a delicacy for the rich. It’s all about perception and presentation.”

“Perception and presentation,” Hannibal echoes. He turns a contemplative look upon Will, and with interest, to Margot and back.

“You can get a lobster roll for five bucks from a street cart, if you know where to go. Nothing fancy,” Will replies. He lowers the knife to the crust. “Or you could get a lobster dinner at a fine restaurant for a hundred dollars, if you wanted to. You could get a roast chicken for a few dollars at the grocery store, or you could get a half roast chicken and sides for fifty at *The Bygone.* You could eat offal made by locals in any small town in a foreign country, or in a five star restaurant where suddenly it’s exciting because it feels high class. The perception of a thing is arguably more powerful than the thing itself. Who would dare to turn their nose up at, I dunno… a sheep’s brain, if it were served on a gilded platter?”

The real words he leaves silent—*a man’s heart.* But Will knows Hannibal hears them anyway.

He cuts a slice; serves it, and hands it to Margot, who so immediately picks it up and takes a bite that Will fondly wonders why he even bothered to give her a plate. Probably because Hannibal is here. He cuts a second slice for himself and tears a piece off with his teeth, and the taste of vegetable and feta and balsamic is strong on his tongue. Delicious.

Margot makes a face. Holds out her hand. Like a highborn lady, chews and swallows before she gasps, “This is awesome.”

“It didn’t come in a cardboard box,” Will teases. “Your expectations are higher.”

“No, seriously. It’s really good.” Margot looks to Hannibal for help. “Try some. Tell him.”

Will bites back a snort when Hannibal blinks. “The presentation is excellent; by Will’s own logic, I believe you, but I need to be going to work—”

She huffs. Puts a hand on her hip. “What, you don’t eat… gluten? Dairy?”

“You’ll find there are few things I don’t eat.”

Margot cuts him a slice, holds it out expectantly—”Then this is for the road,” she says, and not for Will’s lack of effort, and surely against Hannibal’s better instincts, he looks pained as he’s handed a slice of pizza—and Will laughs and laughs and laughs.

Strictly speaking, what Will told Hannibal wasn't wrong. But it wasn't entirely right.

They play cards for a time in the study, and Will and Margot discuss security rotations of the estate staff. She tells him of Mason's habits, of the knife he always carries, and of his timeframe for checking on the swine at night. She tells him that security rarely checks *inside* the barns anymore if there is no sign of trouble, since anything from a stray mouse to a howling bout of wind can disturb the livestock, and if they inspected every time they were riled up, they'd never be home to their families.

She tells him the new code to the gate. Will tells her that he expects it to happen soon, but that he cannot tell her exactly *when.* She will have to be aware. She'll have to see. She'll have to know.

"But I'll give you your vengeance," Will murmurs as they pad through the darkened halls, as he turns on the bathroom light. "And your freedom. I promise."

Margot is silent for a time as she lays out an array of bobby pins, small elastics, and a larger clip. "Unless you get caught."

"If I get caught, it'll be after," Will says. This he's sure of. No one will have any reason to suspect about Annalise until she's found. It'll leave him more than enough time to deal with Mason. "They'll have more to charge me with than attempted murder."

Will inhales. He touches the bobby pins waiting on the sink.

"I'll have to be able to do this myself. So if you can show me, and then I'll try it."

"Why?"

Will meets her eyes in the mirror. "If you're good at hair and makeup, you can become anyone. I need to make myself look different for this dinner thing. I want to be able to undo it—but when it's permanent, no one will know any differently."

"Well, that's annoyingly vague." Margot frowns at him, and gestures for Will to take his hair down. He does. "What aren't you telling me?"

"The less you know, the less they can say you knew." She stands behind him and combs her fingers through the tangles. At the right angle, she almost seems to disappear in his shadow. "You can help me if you want to. I can't stop you. But people will be asking questions in the aftermath. If you honestly don't know about the fine details of what I've done, it might be easier."

"What is that supposed to mean—what you've done?" Margot gathers the ends of his curls. Twists them. Clips them up, and leaves only a small section of the bottom undone, which she begins to braid across the base of his skull. "Where do you fall in all this?"

"Hopefully?" Will asks.

She nods. Secures the end of the braid, and pins it up around itself—an anchor point. Just as she is his.

"If all goes the way I think it will, I'll be fine." Will shrugs lightly, but does his best to keep his head still. He watches her hands move in the mirror as she lets his hair back down, gathers the back, and secures them together with another small elastic. "More of the same, but quieter. Life will go on."

"And the Ripper?" She tucks his hair under; pins the end of his curls to the braid, now concealed.

Will lifts his chin. His hair touches the nape of his neck, but no further. He watches as Margot repeats the practice with the sides, this time left a little longer as it drapes toward the front, some curls left free around his face. “You’ve seen the news. You’ve seen what he’s done. You tell me—do you think he’d be content to see me with Hannibal, knowing he can’t have me? Do you think he’d let Hannibal live if he had any ability to get to him? To rip him from my life, root and stem?”

“So why did you need Mason’s hair?” She ruffles his bangs, arranges them to her liking. Her eyes, though, are sharp. Shrewd.

“Because the Ripper’s not killing Mason, I am.” Will trails into silence. He licks his lips. Lowers his eyes, and says, “Mason’s not the only pawn in the game. I’m not just making Mason look like one of his. I’m going to frame him. And he’s going to get caught for it.”

Margot freezes. Her hands, slowly, fall away from Will’s face. To his shoulders, where she grips him. Where his hair just barely brushes. In her eyes is a glint of fear. Understanding. “I overheard, you know. When you were talking to Jack Crawford. Just a little. I didn’t try to.”

“I knew you would,” Will says softly. “So you know I’m working with the FBI.”

“But it’s more than that, isn’t it? It’s more than the FBI. It’s more than your research and your articles. You’ve met… *him.* Talked to him.”

Talking is the least of it. Will doesn’t smile. “Yeah.”

“Christ.” Margot swallows hard. “Is he helping you?”

Will shakes his head. “No. This is all me. To… prove myself, in a manner of speaking.”

“What if he tells the FBI, after it’s done?”

It’s a strange thing, being so calm while balancing so many lies. “He can try, if he wants. But who do you think they’ll believe once I set the scene? I have the FBI’s assurance that I’ll be protected as long as we catch him. And to the best of their knowledge, they won’t even know I was there.”

Margot lifts her hands. They fall to her sides.

Will blinks. Looks at her, and sees her gaze steadily back, before he looks to the mirror.

His hair is short—bob-length, thick with curl. It looks natural, like a proper cut. Will touches it, shifts his head from side to side to feel how it sways. It’s secure; he won’t have to worry about moving around on the night of their dinner party and having it come loose.

Will smiles. Exhales gently. “It looks good. Really good. Thank you.”

“Yeah, of course.”

Margot steps up to his side. Will glances over at her hair; touches the end of one curl, and sighs. “I’m gonna miss it,” he says with a tinge of regretful melancholy. “At least now I know it’ll look nice, in theory.”

“Are you cutting your hair?” Margot asks curiously. She frowns at him, and then down at her own where it falls forward over her shoulder. Her brows draw together as she tries to piece together fragments of their conversation into the shape of a cohesive plan.

Will hums, a soft thing. “After.” He inhales. Exhales. Smiles. “You should wear your hair curly until this is done.”

Her nostrils flare. Will can see the movement of her throat as she swallows. He wonders, not for the first time, if there’s a part of her that’s afraid of him. He wonders, with time, if she’ll lose her fear of everything. Already she’s changed, become woman who is scratching at the door of her cage. A she-wolf in her own right, howling for freedom with him. Part of his pack.

“I don’t want to tell you everything. It’s easier if you don’t know,” Will says softly. “But when the time comes, you’ll find your car in the driveway with the key inside. Your story is easy. You came home. You went to bed. They’ll find him in the morning, and you’ll grieve. There will be an uproar, but you’ll be safe. Before it happened, you were with Alana. She’ll be your alibi, and so will your home alarm system.” Will presses his lips together. “It may be best if… you’re not there. For it, when it happens.”

A vein jumps in Margot’s jaw. Her eyes light with outrage. “I want to be there.”

“I know.”

“I deserve to be the one.”

“I know.”

“You’re going to tell me no?”

“I’m not going to tell you anything,” Will replies, and she falls silent. “Except that your alibi will be better if you’re seen in the house. In your room, when it happens. If you’re seen wandering the grounds, going in and out of your house—if the *security* system logs you entering and exiting, the police will inevitably ask you why. I can account for your 'arrival' home. Just don’t use Uber to come and go, they can track that. If you need to go somewhere, use a landline, or someone else’s phone. Call a cab, and pay in cash.”

“You’ve thought a lot about this.”

“Yeah. I don’t want to go to jail.”

Margot presses her lips together and exhales hard through her nose. “You came in through the window that night.”

Will huffs. “I’ve been climbing in and out of your window for years. It’s not easy to get up, let alone down. And that’s twice as suspicious if you get seen. Twice as stupid if you fall.”

“I don’t care. I deserve to be the one who decides how he dies.”

He meets her eyes in the mirror. “You can decide. It doesn’t mean you have to be the one with your hands dirty.”

“If you try to tell me that murder is a man’s work, I’ll fucking kill you myself,” she snaps.

Will blinks. He frowns. “I wouldn’t—”

“You were,” she says firmly. “And don’t.”

A moment of silence. It wasn't what Will meant, by any stretch of the imagination. But he sees her point. "I'm sorry."

"I know." She takes a breath, and lets it out. "You know the fucked up part?" Will tips his head to the side in silent query, and Margot says, "If my father finds out I killed my brother, I think part of him would be proud."

"Verger born *and* bred," Will says, and he nods. So does she.

Silence. Breath. Tension, potential, and the threat of an oncoming storm. They're gearing up for a bloodbath in the only way they know how.

"Alright," she says. "Want me to take that out so you can try?"

"Yeah, that sounds good."

"You know—this hairdo, the outfit, some red lipstick? Maneater."

Will grins. His teeth are bright and white in the reflection; a predator's smile. Margot's, too. Both of them, huntresses. Entirely capable. Completely underestimated.

It'll be the last mistake Mason Verger ever makes.

It's late when Margot finally falls asleep, comfortably sprawled across the guest bed and wrapped in blankets. Her laptop is open at her side, where she and Will lay awake watching bad television until the call of rest became too strong to ignore. Will closes the door silently behind him as he exits.

He stands in the hall, heart racing. The moment has come, and he's nearly paralyzed with the anxiety of it, but—

But he might not have a chance like this again; not before their dinner, certainly, and if Will has to wait any longer than he has, he might explode.

No. It's tonight. Now.

He doesn't know what he'll find, so simply for fear of leaving footprints, Will fetches a pair of socks from the bedroom he and Hannibal share. In the closet is what's left of his bag, cleaned of the glass from his shattered laptop. Safely within the hidden lining are several individually-bagged pairs of sterile gloves. He takes one, and descends to get his work boots from the closet. They're clean, but he carries them into the pantry, sets them down beside the trap door. He feels for the seam—it's a subtle thing, but there must be a release. Knowing Hannibal, it could be anything, but—

There's a small, rectangular slat of wood that is not the full length of a plank. Will skims his fingers over it, presses; it depresses into the floor, and creates a ridge suitable for a hand to graso. His heart is in his throat. Will pulls, and the whole mechanism slides up and back on silent hinges; he scrambles immediately for the pantry door. There must be a lock, something—

There is. Will secures the pantry, so if the unlikely happens and Margot awakes and comes searching, at least she won't stumble across this. If for some reason Hannibal gets home and discovers him, well.

That's a different matter entirely, and Will's pulse is thick in his mouth at the thought of it.

What would he do? What could he say? What—

Well, it doesn't matter. And now is not the time for doubt.

Boots on. Gloves on. Will feels for his phone in his pocket and extracts it; he slips his finger from the bottom of the screen, up. The flashlight turns on, almost blinding in the dark, as Will descends into the depths of Hannibal's home. His true home.

The stairs are wooden, but they do not creak; they make no sound at all, and Will is alone with his shallow, muted breaths and the pounding of his heart as he follows them down into the basement.

The room is open. As Will reaches the bottom, he can tell that from the sound alone. Concrete, from the echo. Cavernous, and entirely devoid of natural light; the beam of his flashlight does not even reach as deep as the room goes, so Will looks at what's closer. Along the walls and ceiling run heavy, thick pipes that may be remnants from the rest of the house's plumbing. Large, rectangular fixtures are suspended above, fitted with long fluorescent bulbs. Industrial-grade lighting. But as the light catches something that shines back at him, Will catches his breath in surprise and his heart nearly stops—

And calms again, if Will can call this feeling calm. It's only plastic sheeting, but not cheap stuff, like painter's drop tarps; no, this is heavy-duty, clear, falling in slats to close off the area from…

Outside the perimeter of the sheeting, dark with disuse, but clean to a fault, are medical instruments. A heart monitor. A rolling IV stand. Blood pressure cuff on a wheeled cart. A rolled plastic case, perhaps the length of Will's forearm, that he recognizes well enough to know it would hold surgical tools if he were to lay it flat. On the shelf beneath are stainless dishes of different sizes, different shapes. Against the wall, metal and glass cabinets fully stocked with supplies. Syringes. Drugs and chemicals, and anything any surgeon might need to do… anything he wanted.

From outside contaminants, Will realizes as he steps closer. It's an operating theatre—a sterile one. Private. Fully equipped.

Through the plastic, he can see where the floor is smooth concrete, treated to be waterproof. In the center of the slight downward slope is a drain. From the ceiling hangs lengths of chain, and what they are attached to—

Looped over an iron ring that's mounted to the concrete above, there is a meat hook. And as Will looks to the side, he sees a coiled length of hose, suitable to wash any and all evidence away.

It's horrifying, in a way. But in reality, in Will's heart of hearts, he's not anything but utterly fascinated.

Has there ever been a killer so completely prepared, he wonders? This is so much *more* than strangulation or stabbing or any number of stereotypical murder scenes. What Hannibal can do here… what Hannibal *does* here…

Will carefully paces around the outer perimeter. There's still no back wall in sight, and his curiosity will not be stemmed until he's seen everything he can see.

Beyond the operating theatre is a setup that reminds Will of his shop in the barn—heavy metal racks and lockers that likely hold power tools. There's a table saw. Any number of butcher's instruments,

some of which Will doesn't know the name of. In the center, an empty but immaculate steel mortician's table. In a corner, a heavy iron furnace with a huge, opening door. Will would bet anything it's suitable for cremation if necessary.

On and on. It seems to go on forever. But behind that room is a place where the walls converge together—mostly. But disappearing into the dark is a narrow hallway.

Before that, though. On one side of the hall is a chest freezer much reminiscent of Will's; rusted and ancient, humming, probably lead-lined for what the age appears to be from the outside. Will approaches it; the lid is locked. Maybe that's for the best.

On the other wall is a large sink. Beside it, mounted to the wall, are three hooks. Hanging from each of those three hooks are full-body plastic suits.

Will inhales softly. Bites back a smile, before he realizes he doesn't have to—and he barks laughter at the mental image, but God, it's ingenious. What evidence is there to be found from the killer when the killer himself is protected from the evidence? The Ripper has never left anything behind except exactly what he intends to leave. This is how. This is why.

And with that in mind, Will's laughter falls silent. His breath falls still. A setup like this speaks not to months of thought, or even several years. No—this is decades of experience, lined up here and put into place. Anything a man could need to manipulate a body. To get away with murder.

How long has Hannibal been doing this?

Do we really care? Wilhelmina murmurs affectionately, and fills Will's ribs with longing to trail his gloved hands along each of the instruments here. To disturb and explore, careless and free. *Someday we'll know. Tonight it doesn't matter.*

Well, she's right about one thing.

Will goes to the hallway. It's lined with heavy, sturdy shelves, stretching almost to the ceiling in a way that makes the space feel terribly cramped, solely due to the number of objects they hold. Dark, weatherproof clothing, almost identical to what Hannibal had worn on their hunt. A pair of black military-style boots. On the middle shelf, a heavy black duffel—and Will bites back his anxiety, sets down his phone, if only to unzip the zipper and peer within, careful to disturb nothing inside. Plastic sheeting. A bottled chemical. A cloth. Rope. A sheathed knife. A medical face mask. Gloves, just like those Will is wearing now.

He zips it back up, content to move on. He picks up his phone.

As he does, something colorful catches the light, and his eye.

One section over is a veritable array of license plates, stacked together. Multiple states. Multiple numbers. All of them random, no novelty designs or anything too distinctive. Virginia, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, DC, even the occasional Florida and Texas.

And then Will remembers.

He thumbs through the lot, one after another, until he finds the pair he's looking for—close to the end, but not the very last. There are others behind it. Plenty of others.

DC Plate *NT 6845.* The very same from that fucking silver Chevy Malibu, from Jack Crawford's list of the vehicles in the Press Club parking garage.

How often does he check these, Will wonders? Often enough to notice one set gone?

Maybe. Maybe not.

But in the grand scheme of risks taken, this is a small item easily concealed that could cement Abel Gideon's guilt, and Will *wants* it, so he takes them. Straightens the rest until they look just as they did, and stands.

He follows the hallway, curious, until the end.

A set of stairs to the left. To the right, there is a gated door with a heavy lock, and it disappears down, further, deeper—

Will has heard the rumors of old tunnels beneath Baltimore. He never considered they might be true, and that based on the age of Hannibal's house alone, it may very well be connected to them. How deep do they go? Where do they come out?

But it damn well explains how he can sneak around without getting caught.

Will ascends the stairs. It comes out to a small, claustrophobic space that is worse than the one below, and when Will pushes the panel at the very end—

It opens to the outside, and a gust of cold air chills his bones. Around the side of the building where the driveway and the main road lie, there's a dim glow of distant street lights. This door, though, opens from the back of the garage into the abyss of the night, facing nothing in particular, away from the view of Hannibal's neighbors.

Will *very* strongly doubts this door is connected to the security logs.

The license plates are heavy in his hands—and Margot's key fob is still in his pocket.

He leaves the door just barely cracked. Unlocks the Lexus that is now his, on loan, and pops the trunk —under the floor mat is a compartment where the spare tire is stored, and Will lifts it. Stashes the plates inside it, and sets all back to rights. Out of sheer curiosity, he opens the bag Margot left; riding pants, a top and a jacket. Boots. All her things, all her size. Will's size by extension.

…another time, once she's gone. This is not a task for right now.

Will closes the bag, closes the trunk, and locks it. Retraces his steps. Secures the basement door, and retreats into the cavernous dungeon, the studio within which Hannibal creates his most elaborate pieces of art. And as Will carefully sidesteps everything, and makes sure nothing at all is disturbed as he goes, he has the passing thought that in its own way, like the cold steel of the Verger's packing plants, like the organized disorder of a mechanic's shop, and the brutal sterility of an operating theatre, it's really kind of beautiful.

Will cracks open his eyes when a gentle hand touches his shoulder. Smiles, when a tender mouth brushes his cheek with a kiss. Will shifts, careful not to disturb Margot or her laptop, which has long since gone into sleep mode. He pushes himself up on one arm and reaches for Hannibal, and gladly accepts the affectionate nuzzle he receives.

“Good morning, my love,” Hannibal murmurs. “I’m sorry to wake you, but I felt compelled to come looking when you weren’t in bed. The light was on and the door was open.”

“S’okay,” Will says softly. His eyes drift closed; he hums with quiet contentment. “Must’ve fallen asleep here.”

“How was your evening?”

He opens his eyes, and meets the warmth of Hannibal’s gaze. Open. Unsuspecting.

Perfect.

Will leans over the side of the bed to claim a kiss. He smiles. Huffs. Lifts and drops one shoulder in the lazy shrug of one comfortable with lying, and replies, “Uneventful.”

Chapter End Notes

Hannibal's basement is based off what I could glean from the glimpses we get in the show (RIP Bev) and what Bryan has said about the murder basement at cons (re: the tunnels), and a little of my own imagination of what he'd need in order to make the things he's made. Of course, I think this would grow and change as he got older and adapted his needs for other canonverse things that don't happen in this fic (*coughs* Miriam *coughs*).

3:17

Chapter Notes

> 50 chapters (and counting)!! Almost 350k words!! AND this fic has become my most-read!! I have to say a HUGE thank you to you guys for everything you've done to help me get here!! :D
>
> ALSO, I had the AMAZING experience of working with the incredibly talented @wisesnailart, art wizard of my heart, on commission for Making Headlines, which you can see embedded at the bottom of this chapter. Once the fic is done, I'll probably end up making that the image seen on the first chapter, but for now, just. SCREAM WITH ME, because it's BEAUTIFUL and she is so, so fantastic!! AAAAAAAAAAA.

The house in Wolf Trap is cold inside when they enter. Will knew it would be, in theory—but to experience it in practice is jarring. He shivers inside the doorway. Hannibal's gloved hands settle on his shoulders, and the door closes behind them.

"Come on, my darling," Hannibal murmurs. His voice is low and close to Will's ear. Welcome. Familiar. Much in the way this house around Will is familiar, but unlike Hannibal, the house's welcome feels empty. "Let's get your suitcases packed and get you home."

Will inhales. Exhales. Nods.

And they pack.

Most of his things already have a home at Hannibal's house. This is just… catching Will's wardrobe and personal effects up to the times. His makeup, the things of Margot's he's decided to keep. But his pots and pans? Well, aside from a favored cup or two, why bother? Will packs a handful of knickknacks into the folds of a soft sweater; a few books from the shelf that he remembers as his father's favorites. His hand lingers heavily on the cover of the encyclopedia that has the Ripper's flowers pressed inside. Bringing it with him would be too revealing, too incriminating.

This is still my house, Will reminds himself. *It's not the last time I'll be here.*

He leaves the heavy, hard-bound plant index behind.

It doesn't take long to summarily collect what few physical possessions matter to him. In no time at all, the suitcases are packed, resting side by side on the mattress.

"Is that everything?" Hannibal murmurs. His eyes go to the safe. To the photos, rather than the weapons, that he knows rest inside.

"Almost," Will acknowledges.

And then he goes to the closet.

Hannibal watches when Will returns with a garment bag. His eyes light with recognition. Within them, his creature paces, nearly anxious at being so close to having everything he wants. Will can see the look. He knows it well, from the many times lately he's seen it in the mirror.

"You can hang that up in the car, if you'd prefer."

Will shakes his head gently. He lays the bag out over the threadbare cotton blankets and unzips it. From inside the protective plastic, he extracts his father's jacket. Then, like he has done a hundred times before, he folds the sleeves inward, and then into halves, and rolls it into a tight, military-sharp coil of faded canvas.

"It doesn't really belong in a garment bag," Will says. His voice is a breath suspended between dust motes, catching the light in the cold winter sunbeams coming in through the single-pane windows. "Its value is sentimental."

"Perception and presentation," Hannibal replies, and Will looks at him. His head tilts. His eyes are dark. "It means more to you if you perceive it the way you remember it."

Will looks down at the jacket. He rubs his palm over the canvas.

He packs it in the suitcase and shuts the lid.

"Nothing is the way I remember it," Will says softly, honestly, and offers a bittersweet smile as he drags the suitcase down to the floor, and reaches for Hannibal's hand. "But that's not necessarily a bad thing."

Hannibal exhales. Their fingers curl together. "No, it's not."

They load Will's suitcases into the car. When it's done, Will ascends the porch one more time just to walk through the space, make sure there's nothing he's forgetting. He can always return, of course, but it's a long drive.

Hannibal finds him in the kitchen, and Will turns to meet him. "I think that's everything."

There's a lump in his throat as he says it. It doubles in size when Hannibal does that curious head-tilt he does, and passes in front of him. Crouches, and picks up Winston's food and water bowls from where they've sat on the floor, dry and empty, for all the many days he's been away.

Hannibal straightens up and nests them together. He tucks them under his arm, and for a moment, Will forgets how to breathe. "Yes, I think you're right."

Will clenches his jaw. His eyes sting and smart, and though he *swore* he wouldn't do this, he can feel his expression crumble, feel his shoulders bow inward, an awful grimace at his mouth as the weight of the last few days crush in on him, and the only thing that shields his fragile self is the love he feels, here and now and always, for Hannibal Lecter.

"I'm sorry," Will mumbles, and paws inelegantly at his own cheeks. "I'm being stupid. I just. I love you."

Hannibal enfolds Will in his free arm, touches his mouth to the crown of Will's head. "Shh, Will. It's alright."

"I know."

“We talked about this.”

“I know, I know,” Will whispers. He butts his forehead gently against Hannibal’s shoulder. “It just. Didn’t sink in until now. And I love you. I’m *happy,* I swear.”

“I love you too, darling. I’m glad you’re happy. I want you to be, always.”

“You do a good job.”

“I’m very glad to hear it.” Hannibal smooths his bangs aside and kisses Will’s forehead, a chaste peck. He pulls back, though only enough to catch Will’s eyes, consider him with loving concern. But the monster in Hannibal’s eyes is still restless. “Shall we lock up?”

Will rests his hand over Hannibal’s sternum; can’t quite feel the beat of his heart through the wool, but he knows the thrum of it so intimately that he really doesn’t have to.

Inhale. Exhale. Will smiles, just a little, and he nods. “Yeah,” he replies, and the monster stops pacing. “Let’s go home.”

Will’s things find their place in Hannibal’s home with a surprising amount of ease. It seems at some point he finally embraces the truth of his welcome here, and simply starts putting things wherever he pleases. He seems emboldened by the lack of protest; Hannibal takes account of each new possession with amusement and fondness, and in short accord, everything has a new place. Books on the shelf in the study. A lonely figure or two placed on the edge of Hannibal’s desk, where they look out of place until they are joined by their fellows on the end tables, atop the shelves. One faded ceramic dog in particular makes its home just in front of the hinge of the harpsichord’s folding lid; Hannibal leaves it be, but only moves it a few inches to the side, so it does not interfere when he places sheet music on the stand.

“Would you want an office space of your own?” Hannibal asks him curiously that night, whisking beurre blanc on the cooktop.

Will flips the vegetables roasting on the grill pan with a pair of metal tongs. He hums in consideration; between the sizzling of the food and the hum of the built-in exhaust, plus the gentle melodies playing from a classical streaming station on Will’s phone on the counter behind them, the sound of it is almost entirely lost.

Hannibal waits out his silence. With time, Will concedes, but only as well as Will ever does. Which is to say, he turns the question around on Hannibal. “Would you want me to have my own spot?”

“I am glad to share my space with you, mylimasis. I surely have more of it than I could ever need.” Hannibal nods approvingly at the vegetables; he grabs another handful of cold butter cubes and whisks them into the sauce as they melt. “I only meant that it must be strange to go from having a home all your own, to moving into a place where that space is already occupied, and making yourself a place within it. I would understand entirely if you want a place here that’s all yours; perhaps optimized for your studies, or your writing.”

The song playing from Will's phone changes over; Hannibal hums his approval as the station begins the ever-classic Debussy *Clair de Lune.* Gentle, lowkey, pleasing to the ear, and not overwhelming to the sounds of the kitchen. Hannibal much prefers the sound of Will's voice, regardless.

"Speaking of which, has your advisor approved a thesis topic yet?"

"I think it now officially has to wait until my finals are done." Will huffs, discontented; frustrated with the necessity to wait, even though he understands it. Asked for it, even. Will is introspective to be sure, but a creature of impulse at heart. If he could strike whenever a thought occurred, surely he would, and Hannibal knows he'd much prefer for the semester to be officially over and done with. Soon enough. "But I have a tentative approval for what I've chosen."

"Which is?" Hannibal tilts his head—what will come from the culmination of Will's research on the Ripper? How will he immortalize it into text?

Will pauses. He licks his lips, almost nervous, and then carries on flipping the vegetables with a straight spine. "Comparative analysis of reader interaction with print and digital media. Basically, how direct and unfiltered access to content creators has contributed to an uptick in reader responses, but also unwarranted abuse outside of critique that's much more easily accomplished through digital doxxing compared to a paper trail."

Hannibal pauses. Feels the draw between his brows as he frowns down at the beurre blanc and does his best to keep the expression mild. "You're changing focus?"

"No," Will replies, but his voice is uncertain. It trails into silence before he sighs deeply, before he continues. "It doesn't feel right to write about the Ripper when this whole thing is… unfinished."

"Unfinished," Hannibal echoes. "Do you foresee it coming to an end anytime soon?"

The silence screams, disrupts. Hannibal can focus on little else; something cold and unpleasant clenches behind his ribs—

Will sighs through his nose; picks up a plate, and begins to remove the vegetables from the grill pan. Roasted onions, carrots, turnips. Hannibal watches the way his hands move, steady and sure. "I can use what I've learned in a general sense and contribute research that matters. It's not a change of focus at all. I don't want to out myself as the mind behind *Analysis* while this whole…" Will gestures vaguely, despondently with the tongs.

"You said that you believe the Ripper knows who you are."

"I know he does," Will murmurs, and something about his voice—"But the Ripper will protect my identity to protect himself. Him knowing is completely different from everyone else knowing; news vans parked on the road, trying to bother me any time I leave the house for a six o'clock feature. And there's the FBI to contend with—it's too risky."

Hannibal purses his lips. Objectively he knows that Will is correct, and Will must protect himself first and foremost. But the thought of Will denying his affections, denying his efforts, his many attempts just to make him *see*…

"I just want to be smart about this. It isn't sustainable, Hannibal, and if I'm not careful, I'm going to get caught."

Will, caught? No. He's been exceptionally careful. "I understand your hesitance, Will, but you're much too clever to get caught."

"It's people thinking they're too clever to get caught that *gets* them caught," Will snaps.

Hannibal freezes. His eyes snap to Will, whose shoulders are rigid with tension. He ducks his head.

"I'm sorry. I know you're trying to comfort me. I just…" Will turns away, and Hannibal stares at his back. It's a swift about-face, physically and mentally. Could he…? "Freddie threatened to expose *me* for that whole garbage thing about Chilton's notes. I'm lucky Crawford met me as your date first; he already liked me, and Freddie already had a bad reputation, so he decided she was lying. But he could change his mind at any minute, and I don't want to do anything that would help him look any closer at the whole thing. I just want it to go away so we can forget about it."

Will sets the plate down. When he turns back, there are tension lines around his eyes, as though he expects to be scolded.

Hannibal removes the sauce from the simmering heat. It's all but done, anyway. He draws Will in, close. Touches his shoulders and Will instinctively drops them, relaxes them, at the pressure of Hannibal's hands. Hannibal nods his approval; brushes Will's hair back from his neck. Touches the pad of his thumb to each impression of his teeth on Will's skin.

"Losing you…" Will says softly. "Me being taken from you, and you being taken from me, it's all the same in the end. It's the worst thing I can imagine. I'm not going to let that happen. And if that means I have to play it safe as much as I can…" He swallows hard. "I almost lost you. You almost lost me."

It's only a thread of self control that stops Hannibal from snarling at the thought. He slips his hand into Will's hair and feels the soft curls slide between his fingers. Touches his lips to Will's forehead, and sighs his pleasure when Will tucks himself securely into Hannibal's arms. With time, though, Hannibal takes a step back; sees Will's confused expression as Hannibal reaches for him—encircles each of Will's forearms in his hands, like the warriors of old as they forged a pact. He feels Will do the same, and it feels right. This space between them, charged and sacred. As it always has been. As it always should be. "Perhaps, then, we might soon bind our lives together, so that no one could untangle us, no matter how they tried."

Will's hands tighten. He lifts his head, and his hair sweeps back from his face; his eyes are bright, severe, startlingly blue. Though he wears no makeup this evening, he is unfailingly lovely. Worthy of so much more than simple worry.

Will nods, and he murmurs, "I'd like that."

"Then it will be done."

For a long moment, Will stares at him. Then, as light breaks through the clouds, he smiles. Lowers his eyes. Releases his grip on Hannibal's arms and steps into his space and kisses the corner of his mouth. "Soon?" He asks.

To claim Will as his, forever and always. Little does he know, the wheels are already in motion. "Very."

Will tilts his head. There's a contemplative quietness to his expression, and he nods. "Good." Then, with a huff and a wry smile, a light to his eyes that is utterly familiar, "You can't just call me your husband and not follow through."

Even the memory of that night is enough to have Hannibal's hands clenching, gentling, slipping up Will's arms and around his back to embrace him, if only for a moment. "They wanted to keep me off the scene. You are the most important person in my life, Will, but as we are, I have no legal claim or control over your care. Claiming we were married was the simplest way, and I knew no one at the hospital would say otherwise."

"I'm not complaining," Will replies. He nuzzles into Hannibal's shoulder, leans into his weight. "Not at all. Obviously." And then a sharp, bright spark—Hannibal twitches when he realizes Will has bitten him yet again, a swift and unprompted nip that will leave no mark. Will laughs as he pulls out of Hannibal's embrace and heads for the counter where the bottle of wine waits. "Do you want any?"

Hannibal wrinkles his nose, both at the loss of him, and at what he knows of the wine. "It's a Chardonnay—very sweet, to offset the vinegar, lemon, and shallots. It may not be to your tastes. I primarily use them in cooking rather than for drinking."

"I like sweet things," Will says with a smile; he takes a single glass down from the cabinet and pours himself just a sip's worth; leans against the counter as he swirls it casually around the bowl of the glass, then inhales the bouquet of it, and—

Hannibal's mouth, his throat, his chest all bloom with warmth as he takes in the sight before him. Barefoot, soft leggings, one of Hannibal's own button-down shirts rolled up around his forearms, loose around Will's slender chest. Drinking wine to the sound of classical music in the kitchen and the background hum of food cooking… speaking of mortality and marriage.

He's everything Hannibal has ever wanted.

Will catches his eye. His cheeks tint pink, though he hasn't had more than a sip yet; and he bites back a smile. "What?"

If Hannibal were the type of man to throw his plans to the wind, he would ask Will to marry him here and now. With or without an adequate offering, he already knows the answer. All it would take is the question.

But Hannibal is not that type of man.

Still, before he can come up with an answer to the question posed, Will carries on. "So, tomorrow you're working; food prep Sunday morning?"

Yes. *Working.* "That sounds good to me. I should still have enough time to pick up what we need and don't already have."

"Then we should be in good shape." Will nods firmly. Finishes what little remains in the glass and sets it down. He's halfway through pouring another when the music fades; Will turns a considering glance to his phone, and then to the timer on the oven. About ten more minutes before the stuffed tenderloin is done cooking. He huffs quietly. "We'll have to get better on our timing."

"That's quite alright. It'll keep."

Will smiles. Pushes off one counter and returns to the other by the sink, where he picks up his phone and begins to scroll through. He's framed by the window just behind; flecks of snow catch the light, and with Will here safely within reach, Hannibal can only find the cold weather calming. "Actually, I had something I wanted you to listen to."

Intriguing. “What sort of thing?”

“Margot asked me about your harpsichord, which got us talking about music. Classical, specifically. So I wanted to see what you thought… of… oh, where is it? *Aha*— this.”

Hannibal tilts his head; Will has turned the volume up enough that it fills the kitchen with the lovingly played notes of a piano, the first few bars of—

“Sonata Pathétique,” he says. But the timing is slightly off from standard interpretations, a slowly ambling measure that almost pauses in places. The tone is lovely, regardless, but Hannibal’s brows draw together as he listens. Not *quite* right, but a passionate rendition nonetheless.

There’s a light in Will’s eyes, a smile on his mouth as he carries the phone closer and sets it on the kitchen island, and stands before Hannibal expectantly. He frowns faintly in response; clearly he’s missing something that Will is waiting for him to catch onto—

Oh.

Hannibal blinks. The piano has taken on a quality that is decidedly rooted in soft, ambient jazz. A drum line has been added, though it’s far from overwhelming; beneath the melody, a wandering bass. They all come together to form a rendition of the sonata that is not a *sonata,* so much as it is—

“We didn’t get to dance together at the hospital benefit,” Will murmurs, and casually turns his hand over to offer it to Hannibal, palm-up. “We haven’t since the Gala.”

“Here?” Hannibal asks; not rejecting the concept, but amused by it. Barefoot in the kitchen while dinner is cooking? Still, he places his hand in Will’s, and making a quiet rumble of content when Will steps into his arms, when Will’s hand settles on his waist.

His eyes shine, tentative but… happy. Hopeful. “If we can’t dance in our own house, then where can we?”

Our own house.

“How silly of me. Of course,” Hannibal replies with a warm smile, with a brush of his hand down Will’s spine, “I defer to your superior logic.” And when Will sighs and tucks his face against Hannibal’s throat, when their bodies begin to sway together as two halves of one peaceful pendulum, he’s certain that this bridge they’ve built to unite their lives is just the first of many beautiful collaborations between them, but it *is* the most important.

It will be the foundation of their marriage. And if it can survive the coming quake, Hannibal will be sure that it can weather any storm, outlast any siege, and become a monument to last beyond the sum of their lives—

If.

He chooses every detail with care. There can be nothing out of place.

Under the cover of the winter's early darkness, one day past the equinox and the longest night of the year, and one night prior to the anniversary of his beloved's journey to life, Hannibal constructs what he expects to be the final gift of their courtship.

He stands back. Takes it in. He looks upon his creation and finds it good.

"I'll see you soon, my love," Hannibal murmurs to himself, and heads for home.

Saturday finds Will alone in the afternoon, Hannibal having gone to the hospital from morning until evening. It's an opportunity for Will to slip out one last time before their dinner party, dressed down in a generic gray henley and jeans with his hair tucked up under a beanie. His newfound anonymity is an opportunity for a whole host of errands, and it allows time for one last meeting with Abel Gideon under the shadow of the early sunsets winter brings.

The thought that this might be the last time they meet is one that fills Will's chest with relief. It's not hard to admit to himself that these kind of deceptions are quickly losing any element of fun they once had; the anxiety of all the things that could go wrong now filling inside him until they're nearly overflowing. Too, the desire for honesty plagues him.

He doesn't want to carry these secrets with him anymore. They haunt him day and night, not so unlike the dead. They itch, like the stubble even now growing in on his cheeks. Will barely resists scratching at it.

"Did you finish it?" Abel asks.

Will nods. He pulls the document open on the silver burner phone, devoid of its SIM card, but files intact; a document not yet published, but copied and waiting on *Abnormal Analysis*. "Ready for posting whenever we are."

He holds it out before Abel can ask. Offers, and his offering is eagerly taken.

> ***The Ripper Exposed — the Deadly Double Life of Mason Verger***
>
> *Everyone East of the Mississippi is familiar with the Verger family. They come from a dark dynasty of meat packing and factory farming. Who could say how many hundreds of thousands, if not millions of animals, see their lives end to those metal death traps every year? But the true horror of the Verger legacy is not in the corporate-sponsored cruelty of Molson Verger, but rather, how this sort of wealth and power enabled one of the most infamous monsters this world has ever seen: Mason Verger, also known as The Chesapeake Ripper.*
>
> *They say money can't buy happiness. But what money* ***can*** *buy is a whole lot of silence—at least until the evidence piles up so high that the walls topple over, exposing a graveyard's worth of skeletons for the world to see.*
>
> *Sources close to the Verger family cite that Mason's cruelty began at an early age; even beyond the typical, dutiful performance of one involved in the meat packing business, sources report that Mason delighted in the torture of farm animals. With time, this escalated to the routine and*

flagrant abuse of farm hands, whose protests could never stand up to the sort of power that the Verger's money can buy. And it seems Molson Verger is experienced in covering up his son's crimes: public records show several closed and sealed cases dating back to Mason's early teenage years, undeniably settled without recourse. Others dating after his eighteenth birthday have ended in NDAs abound and multi-million dollar settlements, and that's not even counting those of whom who didn't have the ability to face down a juggernaut like the Verger family's lawyer. According to some staff on the Verger Estate, some of those claims gone unprosecuted are in relation to foster children that have disappeared from the Verger Farm—all of whom were under the age of ten years old.

It's a hell of an accusation for me to make. And who am I to make it, but an anonymous figure on the internet?

So let me tell you about some of the people who have gone missing from Molson Verger's property, and under Mason Verger's influence. Let me tell you about the meat packing safety suits that would shield a murderer from leaving evidence behind. Let me tell you about the months-long investigation of the FBI into Mason's private dealings, and the breaking news situation that brings my conclusion to you today:

The recent conflict at a high society event between Mason and a noted hospital surgeon, which started with threats and escalated with physical violence, and ended in the untimely death and grotesque display of the surgeon's wife, Annalise Gideon.

[Read More]

Will waits in silence as his words are absorbed, as Gideon reads with flickering and widening eyes. He looks up. Looks at Will.

"Is any of this true?" Gideon asks.

Will raises a brow. He leans back in his seat. "Yeah. All of it, except for the fact that he killed Annalise. Margot hates him enough that she was willing to tell me everything, so I knew exactly where to look. I don't do things by halves."

"This is damning." Gideon rubs a hand over his mouth, and Will purposefully does not huff or sigh. *Always with the tone of surprise.* "And there's more?"

"A lot more. I've got seven thousand words lined out detailing Mason's crimes." Will holds out his hand and smiles placidly when Abel sets the phone in his palm.

"Good," he says. His eyes flash, ice blue and cold with their emptiness, as they catch the light. "I want that son of a bitch to burn."

If only he knew about the other article Will has drafted. A similar one of a similar length that bears a different name from Mason Verger. If only he knew—but, of course, he doesn't.

"Lawsuit?" Will murmurs.

Gideon grimaces. His hands tighten on the wheel of the car, though they are stationed and immobile. But under the weight of Will's gaze, he drops them to his lap. Wrings his hands. "Aggravated assault."

“Don’t worry. Those charges will get dropped once this article gets published—or once the Ripper gets to Mason. Whichever. I’m sure he won’t leave much time before he strikes.” Will puts the phone into his pocket; the SIM card rattles next to it. He changes the subject. “Have you decided where you’re going to do it yet?”

Gideon presses his lips together and sighs through his nose; he looks unhappy, but more resigned than he did a few days ago. That’s progress, at least. “She takes a bath at night before bed. Cleanup would be easiest in the shower.”

Pedestrian, but simple, and easily manageable. Will won’t deny his relief. “I can work with that.” He rests his head back against the seat. “Some oxi detergent should do the trick.”

“Not bleach?” Abel asks.

Will shakes his head. “Won’t destroy the hemoglobin. Still shows up on luminol tests.”

“Duly noted.”

Will turns to look at him. He frowns. “How much room do you have in the trunk of this thing?” Abel’s sedan is silver, sleek, but small. “Will you be able to fit her body?”

“Should be easy. It’s roomier than it looks.”

“And you already got the contractor bags?”

“Picked them up at the Home Depot in Springfield. Should be far enough away from Maryland they won’t think to look. Wore a hat, paid in cash, didn’t get gas anywhere nearby. And bought probably the most generic razor cutter a guy could think of. We can use some of your detergent on it, and dump it in the Potomac afterward.”

Will hums; not acknowledgement or denial. “You remember where to go afterward?”

“That motel in Annapolis.”

“And I already rented the room. Cash advance, two weeks—so that’s our window to work with. I stocked it with dry foods and nonperishables. It’ll be a safe place to go while I’m doing my work. And when I give you the okay, use your credit card in town, make your alibi about the fishing trip, and come back. You can settle back into home and wait out the storm.” Will shuffles in place; finds the key in his back pocket and fishes it out. Hands it over. “Keep it in your car for now, maybe, so Anna doesn’t find it.”

Abel nods easily enough. He’s always been so easy, so agreeable. “And you? What’s your alibi?”

“You mean, if it comes up?” Will asks with a slight smile. “Margot.”

“The sister of the guy who supposedly did it?” Gideon frowns at that, but before he can continue, Will cuts him off.

“The FBI will want to know my sources close to the family. Margot is that source. She’ll back me up, and they’ll believe her.”

Gideon’s breath leaves him in a long, slow exhale. Like Will, he sits back in his seat. Somehow, the reality of what they’re doing finally seems to be sinking in with him. He looks nervous; more and more, the longer Will looks at him.

“But if you’re not ready,” Will says, “there’s still time to back out—”

“I’m not backing out,” Abel snaps back. “One way or another. Anna’s had me under her thumb since we got married, and I’m done with it. I’m done with the fancy shit, I’m done with the yelling and the hitting, I’m done with feeling like shit for doing anything that makes me happy. I want freedom. This is how I get it.”

For a moment, Will almost feels a flicker of guilt. Almost, but not quite.

He smiles. Reaches over, and pats Abel’s shoulder. Subtly snags one short, brown filament from the back of his jacket as he pulls away. Will meets Gideon’s eyes in the dark, and he nods. “How *we* get it,” he lies gently.

Naive, unknowing, Abel nods.

The night is cold when Will arrives in Wolf Trap. Margot’s Lexus handled the drive with surprising grace for a coupe; the speed, of course, is unmatched. But Will is even more impressed with what he can fit in the trunk.

He laid down a tarp first to protect the interior; then, two gallons of blood-removing detergent, nitrile gloves, a pack of generic kitchen sponges pilfered from underneath the kitchen sink. A bundle of white cloth. A pair of gardener’s knee pads, as well as heavy-duty work gloves. A 100-yard spool of braided deep-sea, heavy-duty fishing line. A roll of galvanized stainless wire, and a set of wire cutters. What remains of his forensic trace evidence detection kit, a necessity from his days at Loyola —good for a last-chance sweep to make sure he’s left no trace behind, aside from what he means to leave. And, of course, a large, heavy-handled hunting knife, as well as a lighter-weight switchblade.

Will packs it all together in a large, heavy duffel, not so dissimilar from the bag he found in Hannibal’s basement. Of course, neither is it so different from the exact bag Margot had left in the trunk containing her equestrian clothing. The two look similar when side-by-side. Happy coincidence, that.

Will locks up the house and the barn behind him, but only after making one last stop in the bathroom to shave the stubble from his face and remove the bun from his hair. Hannibal need not know about Will’s wanderings today. It’s getting late; nearing seven o’clock, and he could be home at any time. Will figures he’s probably been away from Abel for long enough, and this location is far from suspicious, so putting his SIM card back in couldn’t hurt…

He doesn’t expect much. He doesn’t expect what he gets.

Three voicemails. Ten text messages.

“Will, it’s Jack. I need you to call me as soon as possible—”

>> I have a scene I need you to see ASAP.

>> Call me.

>> Answer your phone Graham. I need you.

"Will, this isn't funny. Call me."

>> Your homework can wait. Call me as soon as you get this.

>> If you don't call me within the hour I'm going to put out an APB.

"Hey, Will, it's Miriam. Agent Crawford asked me to call you. We need you on a scene and I don't know what you're up to, but, uh. Just call him back as soon as you can."

>> hey, crawford needs you to call him please

>> like asap

>> it's about the ripper

>> back and badder than ever i guess

>> Hello, my love. Just getting home from work and about to start on dinner; are you going to be home soon, or would you like me to wait?

Will's knuckles go white. He can feel metal and plastic creak beneath the crushing force of his palm. God, he really should have known better. *Working, my ass. Goddamn it, Hannibal.*

He presses *dial.*

*"Graham, where the **hell** have you been?"*

"Sorry, Jack, my phone died on the way to Wolf Trap and I didn't have my charge cord. What's going on?"

"I need you on this scene an hour ago. Tell me you're at home."

Will's heart speeds. He looks around, as though to see the red and blue lights bouncing from the still trees of the forest. "I'm in Wolf Trap. I was just about to head back to Baltimore."

"Don't. I'll text you the address. It's about an hour's drive and I need you ASAP. My guys wanted to take the scene apart but if you're coming, I'll keep it as is."

Will's already rounding the car; the door slams closed. As soon as he sinks into the seat, the reality of revealing this car to Jack hits him fully. *Fuck.* "I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Good."

Will swallows hard. He shifts the car into gear. "Uh. Miriam left me a message. She said it was the Ripper?"

“Sure as hell seems like it,” Jack snaps, *“But I need to know if this is a message or an escalation. It’s not just one body this time. It’s two.”*

Two.

I’ll build a monument to our union, if I must.

“Don’t let them touch a goddamned thing,” Will snarls back; chokes down the thick and cloying emotions building in his throat. “I need to see it exactly as he left it.” *I need to see what he made me.*

“Then get here.”

Will hangs up. What else can he do but hang up, focus any and all of his attention on the darkened road despite the trembling in his hands, despite the anxiety clawing at the back of his brain that tells him to go *home,* get *away* from the road, return to where he is safe and where he is loved—

Wilhelmina hunts the remnants of his trauma like a wolf after a rabbit. Catches it, claws it, kills it, consumes it. And she’s right to do it.

Hannibal’s gift is waiting.

The text comes through. Will chokes on his breath as he clicks on the address, clicks the button that says *begin—*

“Starting route to: Mutual Consent. Head south on…”

Will leaves the car parked in front of a small home with darkened windows that certainly doesn’t suit a Lexus, but anything is better than driving it directly up to Jack Crawford. Will tucks the key fob into his coat pocket, locks it, and goes the rest of the distance on foot.

The night is impenetrable.

That’s the nature of the darkness in unpopulated areas. Mutual Consent, Maryland could rival Wolf Trap, Virginia any day of the week in that regard.

Maybe that’s why he chose it. Will supposes when this is done, he’ll have to ask.

The trees reach up all around him; this area is heavily forested, but as Will walks down the center of the gravel road, he can see the multicolored flashes up ahead. They disturb the quiet, even without sirens. They give light and motion where Will knows the Ripper intended only stillness.

The rocks crunch under Will’s boots. Here, now, it is the only sound, though he knows that won’t hold true as soon as Will reaches the edge of the crime scene. In this moment, it feels as though the actions of law enforcement are simply agents of the universe railing uselessly against the Ripper’s brand of entropy.

They can’t stop him. They can’t catch him. They can only try to undo what he has done once it’s done, but there is no giving life back once it’s lost.

The lights are blinding, but Will doesn't flinch as he approaches the perimeter. He steps up to the yellow tape and waits.

For a time, it seems like no one notices him. Crime scene techs come and go, gray-faced small-town cops who were surely ill-equipped to see whatever spectacle the Ripper left behind. It wasn't for them, after all.

It was for Will.

He waits and waits until finally someone sees him; startles, and brusquely approaches the perimeter.

Not to scold him. After all, she knows him.

"Jack called me," Will says by way of greeting as Miriam lifts up the yellow tape that says *police line: do not cross*. But Will is not a cop, and nor is he an agent. He's a fox in the rabbit's hutch. They've screamed, and he's come running.

But not to help.

"Took you long enough," she huffs in reply. "He's been losing his mind. It's not good, Will."

He ducks under. Easy entry. "Where?"

Miriam jerks her chin toward the woods stretched out before them. "In there."

He follows. It's easy to let her believe he needs her. Like the Ripper's latest kill isn't a beacon wailing so loudly that Will can almost sense its presence, almost taste its sweetness in the air. Like Wilhelmina isn't shaking beneath his skin with such quaking force that his hands are trembling. Will tucks them in his pockets. "You're not wearing your uniform."

Instead, she wears a black jacket with a patch boasting white letters that read *FBI Training Academy, Quantico*. Miriam's cheeks are pink, but whether with the cold or embarrassment or the faint flush of pleased pride, Will can't tell. "I'm officially in training to be an agent, now. Agent Crawford oversaw my application personally."

"You'll do great," Will says with a ghost of a smile as she leads him deeper into the trees. Far ahead, he can see the steady white light of the LED flood lamps. "I think you're more cut out for this work than most. Everyone else I saw looked ready to puke, or like they already had."

"It's not easy," Miriam admits. She carefully steps over a cluster of roots; the ground here is uneven, and hard with the recent frosts. The woods are unforgiving to the unprepared. "But there's something fascinating about this guy, you know? Maybe that's awful of me to say. But he's definitely not your garden variety killer."

Will bites back a smile. His mouth twists in a fashion that probably seems wry with amusement, with resigned frustration. "Hard to disagree with that. I don't think either of us would be here if he were the usual suspect."

Miriam nods, a short sharp thing. The lights are getting brighter now. Will's pulse thrums in his tongue, inside his ears, rattles his teeth that feel like fangs.

He can hear the sound of water.

The trees thin until they disappear entirely. Will emerges to a craggy cliff high above the water, to a scene set just before the drop, washed out by high-powered lights. He emerges to milling techs, to Jack Crawford's back as he takes in what lies before him, like it hasn't been there for the last two hours.

Will takes a breath. He averts his eyes. Not yet. Not like this. "I'm here, Jack."

He's broken from his reverie. Jack wheels on Will, visibly impatient, visibly irritated, but nods once to Miriam in thanks. "Good. I need to know what the hell this is supposed to be."

Will's eyes don't waver. His jaw is set. "Then I need the scene as it was."

A vein in Jack's temple pulses. "Nothing's been moved."

He tilts his head and inclines it toward the milling agents. Again, and gestures with his chin at the lights. "Like I said," Will replies calmly, patiently, with far less anxiety than he feels. "As it was."

Jack's mouth twitches toward a snarl. His nostrils flare, but— "Clear the area!" He commands. "Lights off, everyone out!"

The set of Will's spine is steady, hands tucked safely in his pockets as the agents pass him by and retreat into the woods. His hair flutters in the breeze, thick around his shoulders and back. It smells like the sea, but also like—

The lights go out with a *click;* with them, the high-pitched electrical whine that had been spinning in Will's brain since they arrived.

"I'll ask you to step back," Will says softly. He's blinded by the sudden darkness, but his eyes are adjusting. He's starving for what they'll see. "Please."

He can hear it when they do. But then the sound of the waves below fill Will's ears, and for a while, he is too far submerged to hear anything else.

He drowns.

Atop the cliff overlooking the water, beneath the sprawling, wide-open sky of stars, two women stand facing one another. One is clothed in a flowing robe of black, the other in gray; the fabric drapes from their arms and flows downward, pools over bare feet and pedicured toes. Wide sleeves expose hands and wrists pale with death that meet in the middle—

—each holding the caps of their skulls, each chalice filled with wine.

The woman in black is older, though beautiful; around the pale dome of her exposed brain is a crown of oak leaves, heavy with acorns. Fruitful, bountiful, nestled into what remains of her dark curls. It speaks of wisdom, stability, longevity. She wears the diadem with poise.

The other is younger, but just as lovely. She has been bestowed a garland of mistletoe; it brings to Will's minds thoughts of the goddess Frigga and her boundless love, the druids and their belief of prosperity, of harmony symbolized by the white berries. It grows so often on fruit-bearing trees, parasitic—but in this context, it speaks of symbiosis. Support eagerly and lovingly given.

Coiled around their arms is a length of vine, flowing from one woman to the next. It's a perennial, ivy: rebirth and eternity, fidelity. Strength. And like this, as it's been positioned, surrounded by forest and water and the moon ripe and full above, Will can see this scene for what it is.

He steps closer. His own hand hovers just above the join of theirs, as Hannibal had held his arms like this only the night before; the vine is thick, strong. Not just coiled. It has grown *into* the flesh, a permanent handfasting. It is not a trimming, but a thriving, living thing—and yet, the brains are so fresh they have not yet begun to collapse. They are still fleshy, pale, whole. Open minds.

The scent of wine is rich in his nose. When Will looks down, it looks almost black as blood beneath the moonlight.

Two women. Two skull caps.

The Two of Cups.

Love. A love so deep and filling and all-consuming that it is undeniable. But this is not just love. And nor is this *just* a proposal.

It's a promise for their future. The promise of a marriage of equals.

I make a point in keeping my promises.

Hannibal promised a monument to their union. This is certainly nothing if not that. And if Will didn't already know, he's certain he'd be reeling right now, certain his world would be falling out from under him.

But he does know. He *sees.*

And it's as beautiful as Will imagined it would be.

Though—

Will pulls himself from the waters of his mind; does not gasp as such, but the breath feels like new life all the same. "Were you able to ascertain cause of death?"

"I told them not to touch anything," Jack replies, and just the sound of his voice is grating. Wilhelmina bares her teeth, but Will sheaths them before they can be seen.

"What," Miriam says, "the skullcaps…?"

"You can live without the top of your skull," Will says evenly, though Hannibal's basement had been empty, immaculate, giving no sign of—"For a while, anyway."

"Lass, get him gloves."

Will pulls a pair from his pocket. "Way ahead of you."

The backs of the robes are not closed with a zipper. They are simply secured with a button at the back of the neck, and when they are undone, the halves split open, and.

"I have what looks like a metal stake impaled through the pelvis for stability," Miriam says. "And an injury sewn up over the left shoulder blade."

Will tilts his head. "I have the same."

She pokes her head up, blonde hair pulled in strands from the ponytail she wears, whipping around her face in the wind. "What does it mean?"

The stitches are neat, even. An x-shaped incision, just as neatly sewn up. One on each body—and Will smiles. “It means he swapped the hearts. They were probably alive when he did it.”

Jack snarls under his breath. His mouth pulls into a grimace, and when Will looks to him, his gaze is dark with accusation.

The lights snap on.

Will holds his arm up to shield his eyes, stumbles—

“Jesus, kid, careful!” Miriam shouts, and Will wavers above the merciless Chesapeake until she snags him by the sleeve.

Will’s eyes smart and sting as his pupils struggle to keep up, but he just as soon has the front of his jacket seized by two hands. Jack’s hands.

“Agent *Crawford!* ” Miriam cries, shocked.

Will isn’t shocked. Jack is a man of action, after all. It must be killing him that he can’t do anything. Of course it makes sense that he’d take it out on what he perceives to be the weakest link.

“What do you have to smile about?” Jack snaps. “All I’ve seen since you got involved with this case is escalation after escalation, scene after scene, body after body. These are *people.”*

“They *were,”* Will replies coolly, and Jack’s pupils contract to pinpoints.

“You heartless—”

Will narrowly avoids pointing out that, in this case, he is not the heartless one. He doesn’t think it’d go over well, though he’s sure Hannibal would appreciate the humor.

“This is exactly what we’ve been waiting for,” Will replies in stony quiet. “This was the plan, in case you don’t remember. I let him court me. I let him trust me. And then I ask him for a favor. This has always been the endgame. We’re *finally* there, Jack.”

Jack’s fists tighten; Will can feel the fabric protest. He wants to demand Jack let him go. He wants to lash out. Claw Jack’s eyes out. But this entire operation is hinged on the assumption of Will’s compliance, so he does nothing.

But he thinks about it.

“You’re a ruthless son of a bitch,” Jack growls. Will can feel the heat of his breath and grimaces. He smells like sweat and stale coffee. His hands shake, though whether that’s the anger or the caffeine, Will couldn’t tell. “How many people have to die so you can string the Ripper along?”

“How many people would die if I *wasn’t* here to string the Ripper along, Jack?” Will snaps back. Vicious pride builds in his chest. Where would they be without him, after all? “You were doing such a good job of catching him before I came along.”

Jack shakes him, just once. But, God, it’s enough to make him nauseous.

“Jack, that’s enough!” Miriam shouts.

Will's stomach rolls. His head lolls on his neck, and the next thing he knows, his legs are supporting his weight again. And then they're not.

Will falls *hard* on his ass as Jack drops him, disgusted. His palms hit the ground with enough force to send pain shooting up his arms and into his shoulders. His skin breaks, scrapes against the shale.

Wilhelmina paces inside him. Her disdain, her disgust, and her desire for blood make him feel more sick than any physical malady ever could.

"I'll ask you one time only, Graham. Whose side are you on? The Ripper's? Or ours?" Jack towers above him. He's full of righteous vindication, but it doesn't mean he's right.

Will glowers up at Jack. "My answer hasn't changed. Everything I have ever done, and anything I will ever do, is to protect Hannibal Lecter." Will's tongue touches his teeth. He tastes blood. Holds up one hand, and gestures angrily at the scene before them. "The Ripper wants me to himself. He thinks we have a connection, mentor and student. He's offering me everything he has to give, *begging* me to take it. Abel Gideon is on a razor's edge of sanity, he's unraveling—if I go to him, Jack, we'll get him. I swear."

"When?" Crawford demands. "How many more people have to die?"

"We'll have him before that happens," Will lies through his fangs. His cheeks are hot with the whipping cold. "I'll write a response. I'll tell him I accept. I'll tell him that I'll come to him, and when I do, I'll tell him what I want. And we'll catch him in the act. We'll nail his ass to the wall and he will *never* kill another person again."

Jack's fists curl at his sides. His jaw is clenched so tight, Will wouldn't be surprised if he cracked his teeth. "The head of the BAU wants this resolved. I told her I had a lead. She wanted the name of my source, and I *narrowly* avoided my ass out the door of the FBI, Graham. For *you.* For this deal we made that you have yet to deliver on, that I made *believing* was for the greater good. My *career* is at stake, and you've made me look like a liar or an idiot. I'm not sure which one's worse."

Jack's career? Ha.

"Do you seriously think I'd fuck you over on purpose? What do you think I'm fighting for?" Will snarls. Jack's brows draw together, his mouth opens. Will cuts him off. "My *life,* Jack! Not my career! My *life!* And the life of the person I love! You think the stakes are high for you? What do you think I'm dealing with? If something happens to Hannibal—"

His voice cracks. His hands shake. Even the thought…

Will ducks his head. Then he pushes himself to his feet, and sways when he stands. Breathes until the world stops spinning, and.

"I'll write your goddamn response. Then I have a dinner party to prepare for. And you better show up, Jack." Will swallows hard and rips the gloves off. Balls them up. Tosses them angrily into a nearby evidence collection station. "Because the Ripper's gonna be sitting at that table, and I've come too far to let him fuck everything up in the eleventh hour. With or without you, I'm putting an end to this bullshit. I want to be done so you can get off my ass, and with any luck, we'll never bother each other again. But it's going to take some time. So unless there's anything else, I have someone waiting for me."

Will walks away from the light. He knows he belongs in the darkness.

“I’m going home.”

3:18

Chapter Notes

Remember that time i rolled up with a 14k chapter because i wanted to just get everything in that needed to happen? yeah, this is that, but leveled up.

this chapter's got a little bit of everything. read in public with caution.

/drops 25k

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's troubling to Hannibal that he hasn't heard from Will at all. He'd sent a text when he got home from Johns Hopkins, to no reply. The attempted phonecall about an hour thereafter, too, went unanswered.

Perhaps it bodes well for Will having found his gift, placed in obscurity though it was—but there were houses across the water that might have spotted such a thing if they were looking, and alerted the proper authorities. It's quite the drive from Baltimore to southern Maryland when there's traffic, and Will had already been gone when Hannibal arrived home.

Perhaps he uses a police scanner; Hannibal's never quite put thought to *how,* exactly, Will tracks down the scenes outside of waiting for the first publications to hit. After all, *Abnormal Analysis* was rarely the first to cover the Ripper's kills. It was, however, by far and large the most thorough in covering them, and what they meant. It has only ever been Will's insight that mattered.

Hannibal contemplates this until he gives in to his own hunger; makes a dinner of flambeéd lungs, cubed and seared in a whiskey glaze, and stores the excess in the refrigerator. Nine o'clock comes and goes, and Hannibal retreats upstairs for a shower. He's keen to refuse the useless desire for worry.

Worry won't help him. Neither will anxiety. He can only wait for Will's response, and though he keeps his phone on full volume in the bathroom while he cleans up, it doesn't ring.

There is another possibility, the traitorous voice in his head whispers. *He could report me.*

The water pours over his head, thick and hot as the rage that sparks behind his eyes at the thought. At the betrayal, however hypothetical. *No, he would never tell.*

He could run. And that voice sounds too much like Will, the memory of a ghost in his mind taunting him with Will's face, saying, *I'll leave you.*

Soap suds run over his body, down the drain. Hannibal scrubs the shampoo from his hair, and the sweat from his limbs. Setting a scene is no easy thing, and this one in particular took strength,

determination to keep the bodies in place exactly as he desired them. But the words taking root inside his body ache more than his muscles ever could.

No. Will's things are here, now. And his place, too, is here, at this house, with Hannibal. Will is not the type to run from ugly truths that confront him. Not anymore.

He'll come home. He'll confront Hannibal. They will work through this, emerge out the other side from it, and be better than they've ever been. Grow stronger from mutual understanding, dizzy from relief. No more split between the halves of their lives.

Hannibal turns the water off and emerges; reaches for his towel on the nearby hook, and freezes with his arm outstretched as he glances down at his phone waiting on the sink.

>> SMS Alert: New Post on **Abnormal Analysis**

He dries himself with haste, steps into the clean change of clothes he laid out for himself—black lounge pants, and a soft, gray long-sleeved shirt that Will has appreciated more than once for being, as he put it, *cuddly.* Simple things. The sort of clothing that Hannibal has worn as they lay together on the couch late at night. The sort of clothing that he imagined would look unthreatening when Will inevitably came home furious, itching for a fight.

But he hasn't, has he? Instead, it seems Will has taken another unexpected route.

Perhaps Hannibal should stop being surprised. But Will's lack of direct action is… unsettling.

He tucks his phone in his pocket, picks up his tablet from the bedside table, and heads downstairs. He bypasses the kitchen on his way to the study (his mouth is dry, but now is not the time for wine), padding through the darkened halls with familiar ease until he reaches the threshold.

There, he stops short.

His hands clench. His knuckles whiten.

There's a figure in the darkness.

His instincts rear up like a wild thing inside him, a great creature pacing at the cage of his bones, shedding the skin of social niceties as his muscles tense, as he prepares himself to attack—

A soft breath. A shift of weight, and the sound of clothes rustling and settling. In the shadow, he sees the slender silhouette slouch and tip its head back on the cushion of the couch, and—

He knows that sigh. "Will?" Hannibal calls sharply.

The head lifts. Will turns, and when Hannibal adjusts his weight into a tense but idle stance, it is just enough for the light to catch his face. He looks… tired. But he smiles, just a little. "Hey, baby."

He doesn't sound angry. In fact, he doesn't sound anything different than he normally does, and the flutter-shiver in Hannibal's ribs is just the same as it has ever been when Will slips into that drawl. Hannibal's jaw tightens, but he crosses the threshold. He feels the coiled tension in every one of his own muscles as he sets the tablet on his desk, and rolls the lamp switch between his fingers until Will is bathed in a warm glow. "When did you get in?"

Will hums. Presses his cheek to the back of the couch, and stretches his arms, spreads his fingers in a way that's distinctly feline. Relaxes. "Not that long ago. Five, ten minutes." He blinks, slow. There's

something almost reserved in his gaze, but not afraid. “Sorry I didn’t reply to your text. My phone died.” Will reaches over to the desk and picks up his phone, which is connected to a wire which threads under Hannibal’s desk. It’s plugged into the power strip beneath. He wiggles it in Hannibal’s direction; the screen illuminates and displays the time. After ten o’clock. It’s late. “I went out to dinner with Margot and Alana. Wanted one last use out of my fake ID.”

He slouches forward. Puts his phone down. Reaches for Hannibal’s hand with a placid smile, and draws it close; touches his lips to Hannibal’s knuckles.

No. No, this can’t be.

He’s lying, but he’s not. He certainly doesn’t smell of fear, nor of anger. But when Will turns Hannibal’s hands over in his own, the palms of his hands are scraped red. Raw.

“What happened?”

“I tripped like an idiot.” Will shoots him a fond, self-deprecating smile. “Guess I’ve gotten too used to wearing heels.”

Hannibal stares at him like he might be able to see the truth beneath Will’s skin if he tried hard enough. What can he do? The things he knows, the truths he knows, are only for the Ripper to know. He hasn’t had the opportunity to read Will’s article yet. Right now, he only has his tired, placid beloved with those trusting eyes and his gentle hands—and those things certainly don’t speak to rage or anger or betrayal.

There’s a notification on his phone that means that Will surely *got* his gift. But the quiet purr Will rumbles against his fingers certainly states the opposite.

“I should probably take a shower, myself,” Will murmurs. “Maybe get to bed early. I’m exhausted.”

Hannibal rounds the side of the couch. Sits on the edge, and does his best not to stiffen when Will flops against his side like he has so many times before. His behavior is typical, but it shouldn’t be. If Will saw enough to write a response, he should *know*—

A thought occurs.

…*has* he seen it? He must’ve. Why else would he have written anything at all?

Will nudges Hannibal’s arm with his cheek. He smiles, small and sweet, and rubs his face against Hannibal’s sleeve. “You wore the soft shirt.”

Hannibal’s lips twitch toward a weighted, complicated smile. “Yes, I did. It’s comfortable.” His fingers go to Will’s hair, loose, unbound, and thread into his tangled curls. The shift of them raises the faint scent of Hannibal’s shampoo. Twinges of other scents, mostly lost beneath the heavier smell of sweat-damp wool and winter air. Will has exerted himself tonight—and the palms of his hands smell of blood and of pine.

He didn’t catch himself on a sidewalk or on the floor of a bar. No; Will fell somewhere… further removed.

And Hannibal has two choices.

He can talk to Will. Ask him outright, what he knows about what the Ripper has done tonight.

Or.

“You should still be careful, darling,” Hannibal murmurs as he works his fingers over Will’s scalp. He sags into the touch. “After an injury like yours, a glass of wine at home is a different matter than drinking to excess with your friends, especially in public when you’re out and on your feet. Especially before you drive.”

“I didn’t have much,” Will replies quietly. His eyelids are tainted lavender, tinged with the evidence of his exhaustion. “It hit me different. Basically stopped as soon as I started, otherwise I knew I wouldn’t be able to drive back.” He reaches; the movement of his hands is more careful, but not tentative, as he grips at Hannibal’s thighs and lists sideways. Places his head in Hannibal’s lap, and pulls his legs onto the couch with a heavy sigh. “To tell the truth, there’s less of a thrill in it now that I know I can just buy it at the store. Maybe that’s childish.”

To tell the truth—he’s not, though.

“I think that’s to be expected.” Will melts under his hands. There’s not so much as a flinch when Hannibal touches his throat. “These things change as our perspective changes. The forbidden loses its thrill when it becomes commonplace.”

Will hums a mild acknowledgement. Nothing more, nothing less.

Hannibal’s frustration grates at him. But the touch of Will’s hand drifting up and down his thigh is a natural balm; one he has trained his body to know and absorb under all circumstances. It’s soothing, even while the instincts inside him shift with their restlessness. Two things at odds with one another, much in the way that he feels at odds now with Will himself.

In such a way that Will seems blessedly, cursedly unaware of.

“Mm. Sorry,” Will mumbles. “M’just. Tired. Should probably get clean before I pass out.” Will finds Hannibal’s hand in his own, pulls it to his face, and nuzzles into the soft hollow of his palm. “Wanna take a bath with me?”

“I just got out of the shower, darling, otherwise I would be sorely tempted.” Hannibal cups Will’s cheek, and against himself, he is soothed at the sound of pleasure he receives in return—and faint, but understanding, disappointment. “But if you’re retiring to bed, I may soon join you.”

“Mmkay. We have a long day tomorrow.” Will kisses the side of his hand, and with a groan, pushes himself upright. His knuckles whiten on the edge of the couch cushion, even before he stands. His eyes close; like a tree in the howling wind, he sways.

Hannibal sits upright. Will hasn’t reacted like that for days now, in the wake of his recovery, and this resurgence is concerning. “Are you alright?”

“M’okay.” Will doesn’t nod, doesn’t move. When he stands, it’s all at once, and he slouches, holds onto things in a way he doesn’t typically.

“Will—”

“Hannibal, I’m *fine.”* He steps around Hannibal’s legs, though curses under his breath as he knocks against the coffee table, and rounds the couch on his way to the threshold. “I’ll just be upstairs.”

Hannibal inhales, exhales; fights over his instinct as to whether he wants to follow or to stay, to absorb Will’s words he holds in his hands, or to gorge himself on the contents of Will’s mind. There’s

no easy answer, and he's torn between the options, when—

"And I'm really sorry I missed dinner."

"That's alright," Hannibal replies quietly. "It was nothing particularly special, and these things happen. I'm glad you enjoyed your time with your friends."

Will is quiet for a moment. When Hannibal looks back, he lingers in the doorway, eyes lowered. Distant. He stares down at the floor like he could stare through it. Says, "Yeah."

He disappears in silence; quiet footfalls that fade into nothingness in an instant, not so much as a shift of his weight upon the stairs. The only indication Hannibal has that he's made it that far is the groan of the pipes as the water starts, and he sits in the study and wonders what, exactly, just happened.

But with this indecision comes inaction. In the end, that, of all the many problems he sees in this situation, is the one that spurs him forward.

He stands, rounds the couch, and sits primly in the desk chair. Opens his tablet. Opens the article. Reads.

And the strange coldness inside his chest sinks lower and lower and lower.

I got your gift.

I know what I saw. I know what it meant. And the time of me being scared by your promises is coming to an end, I promise ***you.***

I'm sure you're ready to be done hiding. So am I. But forgive me—I have to ask you for just one more thing.

Hannibal rubs his hand over his mouth, a slow drag just on the edge of unpleasant.

Will lied. At the very least, a lie of omission—for short of tracking his location, which is altogether too time-consuming, Hannibal has no way of being sure—and he's not sure if it's worse that way, or…

He opens the source code. Enters the password. And, yes.

It's worse.

Forgive me. Maybe I wasn't as careful as I should have been.

I did find your gift, but I didn't get to see it as close as I would've liked. Those who are watching you were, it seems, waiting for me, too.

They saw me, but from a distance. I got away, but only just.

I'm so close to you now. I know it. If only I'd been able to see what you intended the way you intended—I'm sure it was beautiful beyond compare.

Please don't worry. These next few days will be precarious, but I'll do everything I can to throw the hounds off the scent. I knew this time would come. Have faith in me, like I believe in you.

I know you've waited. I know how frustrated you must be. Please be patient. When the time comes, you'll know.

In the meantime, know that I am here. I have hatched. I have grown steady and strong. I am ready to leave the nest and fly at your side.

I'll find you in the sky.

Always yours,

xo ♥

Hannibal closes the tab. Locks the tablet, and sits back heavily.

The conflicted emotions he feels are at odds with one another. Anger at the lies. Anger at the fact that Will was hurt tonight, and lied to him about the when and where and how. What else is he lying about? But more importantly—perhaps *most* importantly—is the judgement call Hannibal alone can make.

Will lied to Hannibal. But would he lie to the Ripper?

Logic says yes, maybe. He's proven an alarming proficiency at it, and it would be naive to assume that Will is being entirely honest with *anyone.*

But.

Despite the many things that have been said with words and without, there is nothing in the way Will looked at him tonight, in the way Will touched him tonight, that spoke of dishonesty—or of the fear that would come hand-in-hand with learning the truth. Hannibal's particular brand of insight into human nature is one that goes beyond what is said. It lives in the root of biology, chemical reactions and involuntary expressions, but also in the intricate knowing of a kindred heart.

Will's heart is not a liar. It never has been.

Regardless of the pretty tales he spins, of the prose he writes, at the very heart of the matter, it comes down to this: does he trust Will to have his best interests in mind, both as Hannibal Lecter, and as the Ripper?

Trust isn't known. It's felt. You either trust me or you don't.

…yes. He does.

Will campaigned to the Ripper for Hannibal's safety. He wouldn't do that unless the love he feels is true. And if Will's words tonight are to be believed, even if only in part, he escaped notice of the FBI in the name of defending the Ripper's interests. Those are not the actions of a disloyal person, who might've given everything they built in the name of saving himself from scrutiny. At every turn, he has sought to save the Ripper and Hannibal both.

I love you. I'm not going to betray you. I could never do that. Please trust me.

Will's heart may be divided, yes. But it loves with everything he has to give.

Hannibal closes his eyes. Rubs his hands over his face, and exhales slowly through his nose in an effort to calm the building tremors in his hands, the thunder of his heart. He's frustrated. In truth, he's

angrier than he cares to admit. But he cannot afford to act rashly.

For the sake of everything he's done thus far, he *can* afford a few more days of patience. For the sake of the life Hannibal has sworn to build with his beloved, he has to do what he has only ever done for Will Graham.

He must trust. For if he can't, he has nothing. Without it, everything has been for nothing, and all of it will come to nothing. The alternative is unthinkable, and Hannibal simply cannot conscience that Will is capable of that.

He has to trust Will.

It's the only thing he can do.

And when the night falls in earnest, when the anger has cooled but not faded, Hannibal goes upstairs. Pads on silent feet through the bedroom to the bathroom to brush his teeth, and in that light, he sees. He sighs.

The blankets on his side of the bed have been turned down, ready. And Will, sweet and soft with sleep, is curled toward that empty space like a plant seeking the sun.

He barely jostles when Hannibal slips beneath the blankets. But once Hannibal settles, once he is enveloped by the residual furnace heat of Will's slumbering body, he feels a shift. A brush of tender fingers against his arm, slipping down toward his waist.

"Did I wake you?" Hannibal murmurs.

Will makes a noncommittal sound. He tucks his chin down, scoots close, and gently butts his forehead against Hannibal's shoulder. It's an affectionate gesture, one Hannibal responds to instinctively by cupping the nape of Will's neck and feeling their pulses slow in time together when Will goes lax, when he purrs.

Will's barely awake to start with. What little awareness he *does* have is solely for *this*.

Hannibal puts the anger to bed somewhere far away from Will.

He touches his lips to Will's temple, feels the fluttering thrum of veins beneath damp, soft baby hairs, and whispers, "Happy birthday, mylimasis."

Hannibal does not sleep so much as doze—he'll admit he spends most of the night going over his thoughts, considering how rash it might be to snap the neck of any federal agent that shows up unprompted on his doorstep.

It would be an impulsive thing. Almost surely a damning one, when whatever cheap-suited swine's disappearance alerted the cavalry, and the entirety of the FBI descended on Chandler Place in their search for Will Graham. There are other modes of escape from this house, but Will doesn't know that yet. Logically speaking, thinking it through to the inevitable end, having Will find out the truth in the midst of what would necessitate a clever escape would be altogether… unfortunate.

To put it mildly.

The scenarios plague him, and well before the sun rises, Hannibal is on edge and exhausted, irritated and overwrought. Not even the weight of Will's body and the sweetness of his scent can fully smooth over the furrows wrought into the fabric of this person-suit that holds him together.

Hannibal has never made the mistake of trusting anyone before. Unlike *everyone,* he has trusted Will. Has made the conscious decision to have faith in him, to believe that he's an equal first and foremost. But this whole endeavor has called not only Will's intelligence into doubt, but also his honesty. His ability, and…

It is one of two things. It is either a trial for them to weather together, or a test for Hannibal alone. For now, he must hold the idea close that this has *not* been a mistake. That he and Will are two halves of a larger whole, albeit misaligned right now. But they fit together. They do. After everything, they must. How could a mind clever enough to uncover the Ripper's darkest secret be so *stupidly* unaware of his identity? Will's blindness must be a lack of opportunity to see the truth, and maybe even unconscious willfulness. It can be difficult to let go of a pleasant dream when one is beginning to awaken. That much, Hannibal could forgive him for.

But the time is coming for him to accept the truth. He can't imagine the transition would be easy, but he must believe that Will can handle it in the end. The man Will knows as his lover and beloved, and the man Will knows as his devoted creature in the night… would it not be so much easier for them both once Will *knows,* well and true, that they are one and the same?

…and it's not what he wanted, not what he imagined, but life so rarely is…

Perhaps Hannibal should be the one to tell him.

It's a thought that lingers in his mind as he extracts himself from bed. Hannibal dresses in dark pants and a button down, which he tucks into his waistband, rolling the sleeves up as he quietly closes the door behind him and descends the stairs. In the kitchen, he butters a pan and scrambles organic duck eggs with cheddar and chives. He lays several slices of bacon into a skillet, cut from the belly of a man who caused a scene in the market, and brought a young customer service assistant to tears. She was a pretty little thing, petite; the blue of her irises had been striking against the puffy pink inflammation. She had reminded him so thoroughly of Will that he had hunted the man down within the month and left nothing behind for his family to find—though whether his children would miss him is up for debate.

The food fills the kitchen with scent, rich and delicious to compliment the coffee Hannibal's brewing. They have a great deal to do before they're ready for the dinner party this evening, but first…

Well. It *is* Will's birthday. And despite this conflict, this tension, the fact remains that it would not exist if Will were not the most important person in Hannibal's life, the most crucial to his continued joy. Someday, this time will be behind them. When that day comes, Hannibal wants to remember these moments as pleasant ones.

He plates the food and seeks out his serving tray, but before everything is neatly settled, Will crosses the doorway with messy hair and heavy-lidded eyes, wrapped in his gray, knee-length robe. He blinks slowly at the tray. His eyes lift to Hannibal's. And he smiles, so fully and completely that despite his weary countenance, he glows.

Sweet, blind little thing. Clever, dangerous thing. If only Hannibal could reconcile the many things that make him love Will Graham into once complete, fully actualized whole.

He exhales. Smiles back, and glances ruefully down at the breakfast tray. "It seems you've beat me to it."

Will snorts gently. "I can go back upstairs and pretend to be asleep, if you want." But he does no such thing as he draws closer, tucks himself under Hannibal's arm, and nuzzles into his shoulder. "Morning."

"And good morning to you, darling," Hannibal replies. He kisses the crown of Will's head; the corners of his mouth involuntarily pull upward at Will's pleased wiggle. "Happy birthday."

"Thanks," Will murmurs. "Made it to twenty-one."

"And you'll make it to many more." Hannibal runs a hand through his curls, trails fingers down the nape of Will's neck. "Shall we eat in the dining room?"

"That sounds good to me." Will blinks slowly, a clever light in his eyes. He pushes up on his toes to kiss Hannibal's cheek, and takes one plate from the tray. He's grinning as he turns away, a bounce in his step when he says, "I'd say I'm sorry for foiling your master plan, but if I managed to get the drop on you, I must be doing *something* right."

Will dresses for the day in skintight jeans and an untucked button-down, sleeves rolled, hair thrown up into a casual bun with his bangs clipped back. He's shaved, but hasn't put on makeup; says, when he notices Hannibal looking at him, that it's much easier to put his makeup on later than have to deal with removing a layer first. He wears an expression of grim determination suited to any veteran sous-chef in a traditional French Kitchen, wielding a knife like an extension of his arm.

He's gotten much better. Hannibal looks over his hollowed mushrooms with an approving, satisfied nod. "Well done. Let's lay out the puff pastry. I'd like to get everything prepped and ready for the refrigerator."

"Got it." Will sets the mushrooms aside in a bowl, and the knife next to it; swipes the counter with a damp, clean sponge, dries with a towel, and then dusts flour over the stainless surface. "Do you actually even *own* mini muffin tins, by the way?"

"Of course, though I haven't used them for some time." Hannibal smiles to himself as he sears bite-sized cubes of loin for later roasting, and sauteés a different collection of minced mushrooms with shallots and rosemary on the cooktop. "I prefer cooking to baking. More room for interpretation and innovation."

“I would have thought that someone with your attention to detail would appreciate a good recipe.” Will flashes his teeth in a cheeky smile, but rolls out the pastry as directed. “Where’s the dijon?”

“Behind you. And yes, I am perfectly capable of following recipes, I simply don’t prefer them.” Hannibal huffs through his nose, casting an exasperated but amused glance at Will’s back.

“Never said you *couldn’t,”* he retorts smartly. “Maybe your attention to linguistic detail isn’t as fine as I thought.”

Hannibal resists the urge to snag his clever thing by the belt loops and reel him in—so delightfully impudent. Hannibal growls under his breath; shoots Will another look that he meets head-on, bright with challenge. “Behave, darling. We wouldn’t want our guests later to think we were at odds.”

Will pauses as he gathers the jar of mustard, stirring it idly. It lasts only a moment as he turns back to the puff pastry and dabs each scored square with a small amount, just enough to place the tenderloin cubes atop of and hold them fast like glue. “Are we?” he asks. “At odds?”

Hannibal frowns. Lifts the cast iron skillet with a heat-resistant pad, and carries it over. With the tongs, he sets one cube each exactly as required. Doubles back for the mushrooms, and scoops a tablespoon each over the seared loin.

“Not at all, my love,” Hannibal replies, and ducks to brush a kiss to the apple of Will’s cheek. But before Will can turn into the touch, Hannibal retreats to place the hot pan back where it belongs. He feels the weight of Will’s gaze, but when he turns, Will is dutifully wrapping the Wellington bites and placing them onto a tray for chilling.

Perhaps he should say something else, but the words do not make themselves known. Hannibal watches him for a time, but Will simply carries on without acknowledging.

Strange. Hannibal’s brows draw together. His head tilts, just slightly.

Are they at odds?

Will carries the tray to the refrigerator and places it inside; hums approvingly at the pre-made layered tomato-basil spread as he closes the door. He brushes his floured hands onto the front of the apron Hannibal provided him.

And then he turns, framed by the stainless steel of the refrigerator and the pantry door behind him. Pinned by Hannibal’s searching gaze, Will stops. He doesn’t flinch, doesn’t cower. The set of his posture is straight and proud; not tense, but certainly steady. In his eyes, a curious flatness.

For a moment, all is still, and the monster inside Hannibal’s guts lifts its head to scent the air for a challenger. Hannibal’s fingers flex, he inhales—

Will walks away.

More specifically, he goes to the pantry with his hip cocked and his head tilted, pushing up onto his tiptoes to see the upper shelves. He turns his back, so terribly vulnerable in this moment—and the monster inside Hannibal soothes. No, a challenger would not bare their back to a threat. Will would not leave himself vulnerable if he knew.

“I can get started on prepping the cranberry-brie and the sweet potato tartlets so those’ll be ready to go. And the potato gratin stacks, too, probably. I figure we can make up the other toppings for the crostini ahead of time and toast last so they’ll still be warm when people get here.” Will lowers

himself to flat-feet with a frustrated huff. He turns. Looks to Hannibal and raises his brows with an upward quirk of his mouth. “Thoughts? Muffin trays? Anything?”

“In the cabinet to your right, above the counter,” Hannibal answers. Will goes immediately and makes a sound of success when he unearths them. “And yes, I agree about the spreads, though some of them are going to be served as courses, rather than an appetizer. The layered spread, for example, is a pre-meal endeavor. The pancetta, pear, and feta with honey I plan to make into more of a crouton to be served with the butternut squash and farro salad.”

“It’s not a salad if it’s warm,” Will huffs. Smiles. “But that’ll be really tasty. Alright, so. When do you want to do the cauliflower fritters for the crème fraîche and caviar?”

“You can use the mandoline to make rounds at the same time as slicing the potatoes. It’s—”

“In the pantry, right.” Will sets the tins down and changes direction. He disappears through the unlocked door, and Hannibal’s heart only makes *one* aborted leap when he calls, “Hey, uh, Hannibal?”

Hannibal pauses. “Yes, my love.”

“Um.” A tense pause. “Weren’t we supposed to uncrate the champagne and put it in the cooler?”

Relief. Hannibal rubs a hand over his face. “We were. And by the tone of your voice, I’m assuming we both forgot.”

Rustling. The wrenching *pop* of a wooden lid being pulled free. “Do you think if I do it now, it’ll cool in time?”

“I would think so, we’ve got another few hours yet.” Hannibal brings the skillet for the mushrooms to the sink to clean; the one he used for the steak is well-seasoned, reusable for other meats. “If you need more room, you can remove the reds and set the second zone to forty-seven degrees.”

“Yes, Chef,” Will replies, too muffled and breathless to sound sardonic. Quieter, he mutters to himself, “Yeah, I’m gonna need to do that. Okay…”

Hannibal dries the pan and returns it to the rangetop. “Do you need help?”

“No, I’ve got it. But if you could wrap the asparagus in the prosciutto, I can put the mandoline there when you’re done.”

“Very well.” Hannibal wipes his hands dry and returns to the station Will set up on the counter behind him. Fortunately, it’s a swift process, and before long he hears the sound of Will’s footsteps; shuffles over so Will has room to place his burden. And though he would usually not tolerate such a thing, when Will snags a piece of prosciutto and pops it into his mouth with a grin, Hannibal can only sigh gently through his nose and hide the fact that he is in no way dissatisfied with the pleased noises Will makes. “You’ll spoil your appetite.”

“I guess I’ll just have to work extra hard to make sure I get it back.” Will, too, joins in his task. “How did you ever do this by yourself?”

“With a great deal more chaos, I assure you,” Hannibal replies with a faint smile. “When we’re done with this, I’ll likely start on the tartare. When you’re done with the tartlets, do you mind molding the filo cups? Then we can work on the pavlova.”

“Actually, I made the meringues before I left yesterday. They’re in a tupperware in the pantry, I just need to make the Greek yogurt and mascarpone mixture, and the honey balsamic.”

Hannibal’s brows raise; the kitchen had been spotless, not a thing out of place. If Will cooked, it’s a pleasant surprise to know he cleaned up after himself flawlessly. And unexpected.

Will catches his somewhat incredulous expression and replies, droll, “It took three years of forensics experience to clean your kitchen to your standard, but my education was clearly worth it if I’ve rendered you speechless.”

Indeed. “I’ll admit I’m impressed.”

“I will accept your awe in the form of putting these in the fridge.” Will smirks and hands him the glass container of wrapped asparagus, covered with cling film. Hannibal accepts it with a gracious incline of his head and does as he’s bidden. The refrigerator is growing more full by the minute, but fortunately it should make the actual cooking quite simple when the time comes. The benefit of being well-prepared hosts.

And speaking of…

“Actually, I would offer my awe in the form of placing you at the head of the table tonight, with me opposite you.”

Will fumbles a sweet potato. He turns to Hannibal with wide eyes, parted lips. “What?”

Hannibal closes the refrigerator. He turns, and leans back against it. “This endeavor was your idea, darling—and as it’s your birthday, you are also the guest of honor. That makes you the host, or hostess if you prefer.” Will blinks at him, sweet and doe-eyed, even as pink blooms in his cheeks. It seems so rare, now, to catch him off-guard in this way. It’s intensely satisfying. “You know all of our guests; there won’t be any strangers at our table. It seems only right to put us each at opposite ends so that we may attend to things as needed.”

“I…” Will lowers his eyes. He takes a breath. Then, he squares his shoulders and lifts his head, and gets back to poking holes in sweet potatoes like nothing is awry. “If you think so, then yeah, I can work with that.”

“I have every faith in you, Will,” Hannibal replies. Approaches. And when he places a hand at the tense juncture of Will’s neck, he melts. “And after the dinner is over, we’ll have the rest of the evening to ourselves, and the holiday thereafter. We can stay here, or go elsewhere if you desire. Whatever you’d like.”

Will leans into his touch. The movement of his hands pauses, and he looks at where Hannibal’s palm rests—and then up his arm, his neck, until he reaches Hannibal’s eyes. In his, Hannibal sees quiet thoughtfulness. Too, unrepentant love. “Go elsewhere?” Will parrots. “Away?”

It calls to mind the conversations they’ve had, of how Will has never left the country. Never seen Paris or Athens or Rome. To Hannibal, who grew up exclusively *elsewhere,* the thought is almost inconceivable. “It would be my delight to show you anywhere you can think of being. Perhaps some places that I, myself, have never been. I’m sure with your clever mind, you’ll come up with such a place in an instant.”

It works—Will smiles. He idly pokes holes into a yam, leaning into Hannibal’s side all the while. For a moment, despite the crunch of time their preparations face, Hannibal allows himself to enjoy the

indulgence. “I don’t exist solely to make your life difficult, you know,” Will murmurs fondly.

Well, someday Hannibal might even believe that. “Of course not.” Will raises a brow, and Hannibal continues, “Only to push my limits, and to make me a better man than I am. You know you challenge me, darling. In most cases, I find that challenge delightful.”

“Most cases,” Will echoes with a smile. He licks his lips. Tilts his chin and presses a chaste kiss to the concealed imprint of his teeth on Hannibal’s shoulder. Then, “Alright. I’ll take my seat at the head of the table, and hopefully I won’t embarrass you too much. And for travel, I’ll think about it and get back to you, how about that?”

“You could never embarrass me,” Hannibal says. He’s quite certain of that; Will has never been anything but entirely fascinating, even when he’s frustrating. And he has every belief in Will’s ability to navigate the array of guests they will bring into their home tonight. “And yes, think about it. Perhaps that can be my birthday gift to you.”

Will raises his brows, playfully affronted as he nudges Hannibal with his hip. “You didn’t get me anything? I’m shocked.”

Hannibal huffs through his nose. He does have things he could gift, yes—but things he meant to save, and others meant for the holiday, and nothing specifically tailored to the anniversary of Will’s birth… “You gave me only a week’s notice, and then with your injury…. Forgive me; you have caught me unprepared, as you so delight in doing.”

“Inconceivable,” Will replies drily. “Can’t believe it. Absolutely offended. Might as well tie up our entire affair right now.”

“Indeed,” Hannibal agrees; squeezes Will once around the shoulders, and then retreats to his post. “Well, darling, I never thought it would come to this, but I suppose this is the end.”

He knows damn well it’s a joke. But it leaves a bitter taste on Hannibal’s tongue, and the words feel *wrong,* and he is about to take it back when—

A pair of arms wrap around him from behind. Will’s cheek touches his spine between the gap of his shoulder blades. Hannibal stops in place, lays his hand over Will’s hands, folded together around his waist; fingers tangled like the roots of a tree, not so easily removed. It is a good thing, then, that Hannibal has no desire to remove him.

“I’m joking,” Will whispers against his back. “I know you know that. I know you are, too. But I…”

“I know,” Hannibal murmurs. He places his hands over Will’s, and for a second, he closes his eyes. Allows himself to be embraced by his vicious, tender-hearted love, and savors the bittersweet tang of this moment as it lingers on his senses.

“You could never get me another thing, and it would still be too much a hundred times over.” It’s said in a rush, like he can’t get the words out fast enough. “We could live together in Wolf Trap every day for the rest of my life and I would be happy if you were happy. I don’t care about wealth, and outside Margot, I don’t even care about our friends. I care about *you.* I *belong* to you. *With* you. No matter what.” Hannibal’s heart swells within his ribs. Will takes a breath. “And you’re mine. And that’s all I need. I… just needed to say that.”

Hannibal rubs over his hands. Threads their fingers together, and pulls Will’s arms tighter around himself. He revels in the shuddered sigh he feels against his back. And so what? So what if Will feels

this way about Hannibal Lecter instead of the Ripper? They are the same creature with different faces. But the shape of them, the way they fit into Will's arms is exactly the same.

They will make it through this time together. What else is the alternative, when neither of them will settle for anything less?

"I couldn't tell you a finite moment when I began to love you," Hannibal says quietly. "It feels to me as though it's always existed, stretching forward and backward through time, waiting for me to realize what it was. As such, I can see no end. It will never end. It will always be, just as it has always been."

Will nods against his back. Hannibal feels the movement in the beat of his heart.

Hannibal's hands tighten around Will's. Will squeezes back, a count of three. *I love you.*

Deliberately and too tightly, Hannibal returns it.

They linger until finally, Will lets go. "Alright," he says, and retreats to his station with swift steps. "Let's get this prep done so we can get ready and do this thing and have it be over."

It startles a laugh from Hannibal's chest. Truthfully, he could not have said it any better himself.

Hannibal changes into nicer clothing later that evening, the black oxfords, pants, and white shirt of a fine suit, and a silk-embroidered red waistcoat that Will had selected for him with a certain gleam in his eye; a certain weight to his movements as he handed it over and said *wear this.*

Hannibal burns with curiosity as Will shoos him from their bedroom and takes over the upper level of the house. Fortunately, Hannibal has more than enough to keep him busy.

The petite Tenderloin Wellington (for he'll not call them *beef* within the privacy of his own mind) go into the oven first, accompanied by the round stacks of potato gratin topped with chopped bacon and gruyere. The filo cups for the heart tartare are ready to be plated shortly before guests arrive; after all, they may be eating the meat of their fellow man, but Hannibal is nothing if not a stickler for food safety and quality. The prosciutto-wrapped asparagus go on the skillet plate to crisp, along with nearly two dozen rounds of buttered, fresh crostini until they are nicely marked with char. He takes the spreads from the fridge to come to temperature—a layered round of sundried tomato, pesto, and ricotta cheese, and a second spread of liver pâté.

He breads and shallowly fries the cauliflower fritters setting them out upon a tray where they will be topped with the crème fraîche and caviar only just before eating. Warms the squash and farro salad, and garnishes the bowl with candied pecans and dried cranberries. Removes the Wellington and the potatoes from the oven and sets them all aside to rest and wait to be plated. The tartlets take their place to bake.

It is some point around that time that those few hired waiters arrive; a generous wage paid in cash under the table to those he knows are polite, discreet, and suitable, on loan from his associates at *The Bygone.*

And then the real work begins.

“Pierre, if you would set the table with the Minton china on the counter. Afterward, there are barstools under a drop cover in the garage; I’d like them brought inside and placed before the island. Desireé, I have a case of *Roederer Cristal* in the wine cabinet in the pantry. If you could take three bottles and place them into the ice buckets—there’s an automatic ice maker beside the wine fridge, and there should be more than enough. Please set them out here where they’ll be easy for us to access, and when you’re done, please help Pierre. Jamal, I will ask for your assistance plating. Follow my direction for entrée and appetizers, I’ll tell you which is which. And please be prepared to step in for me if the doorbell should ring, and I’ll attend to my guests. My partner should be down at some point before they start arriving; they’ll assist depending on where we are in the process when the time comes. If you finish your tasks, let me know, and I’ll find another. Let’s get to work.”

The table, fortunately, has already been decorated to Hannibal’s tastes; several white, square vases blooming with blood red hydrangea and white roses, reaching skyward with holly branches. There are pinecones dusted with white and gold to accent the plates; decanters of wine on cut-glass coasters, a fine Chateau Margeaux to compliment the more savory dishes. And on the mantle, now laid out with a fine runner of red silk, are halved pomegranates and figs to nestle around the bases of gilded platters bearing dessert dishes, and flickering strings of fairy lights interwoven into the wall of herbs. Hannibal had resisted Will’s idea of string lights compared to the more timeless pillar candles, but he must admit, the glow is atmospheric in a way that candles could not safely attain.

With most of the preliminary prep done, the cooking itself goes quickly; one dish emerges and another goes in, and by the time everything necessary has been baked, there is still time to arrange the platters and set them to stay warm or cool as necessary.

And then the doorbell rings.

Hannibal lifts his head—

Six twenty-nine. Right on time. Hannibal frowns; Will hasn’t—

Footsteps on the stairs. The click of heels.

“Excuse me,” he murmurs, and slips around the assistants to meet Will in the foyer. “Darling?”

“I know, I’m sorry, it took me a little longer than I thought…”

Hannibal stops.

Will descends the last few steps with grace, scarlet manicure standing out sharp against the banister, picked to match the striking soles of the Louboutins. Will’s slender legs are clad in clinging black pants that are cuffed sharply around the calf, and a waistband that disappears beneath the draping, asymmetrical lace hem of his smartly-fitted blazer. The delicate floral pattern falls around his hips and thighs like a skirt, contrasting the ink-black body and satin lapels, interrupted only by what appears to be a… Hannibal’s lips press together. Yes, a sheer, steel-boned corset waist. Will’s pale flesh shines through, and he seems to wear no shirt at all beneath it, but for the flash of red lace that is only *just* visible within the plunging vee-shaped neckline. The collar is prevented from separating by a thin, silver chain and tiny rectangular pendant that says *McQUEEN*.

A glint of jewels catches the light, and draws Hannibal’s eyes upward to his earrings, his painted face, the ink-dark fringe of his lashes and cat-eye liner. Red lips, accented cheekbones, not so unlike a porcelain doll.

And then Hannibal sees. His mouth opens. He blinks. “Your—”

Will sidles by him quickly and goes for the door; opens it with a welcoming smile and a flutter of brown curls that only fall past his jaw, not even long enough to reach Will's shoulders. A *dramatic* difference.

Hannibal stares.

Will beams as Margot enters with Alana; of course, the first to arrive as Will's dedicated entourage. "Hey!" Margot exclaims as she embraces Will. "That came out great! You look amazing!"

Alana's eyes gleam as she waves to Hannibal; giggles as she accepts Will's fleeting kiss to her cheek in greeting. "You look awesome, Will!"

Will's lashes lower; his cheeks flush. "Thank you. Can I take your coats?"

"I can handle our coats," Margot replies firmly. Indeed, she does. Then puts her hands on her hips. "Alright, go." Will cocks his head, and Margot rolls her eyes. *"Spin,* you goober, I want to see."

"Oh." Will huffs, almost embarrassed, but does as she says—and yes, from the back, it's quite clear that the corseted waist is exactly that; just see-through black lace that hugs Will's ribs and flares around his hips, exposing pale glimpses of his spine until it's covered by the rise of his pants.

But Hannibal is just as captivated by the nape of his neck. The nearly-invisible impressions of his teeth, hidden beneath his hair and the flash of Will's earrings, now so much more prone to catch the light—

"Do you like it?" Will asks quietly, and though his words seem like they could be for Margot, he is looking only at Hannibal. Hopeful. Nervous.

Breathtaking.

Hannibal reaches out to gently tug on the end of one wispy curl close to the front. Tilts his head and stares, observing where the back is not quite consistent in length, almost tucked…

Under.

I'll do everything I can to throw the hounds off the scent.

Hannibal smiles. "You are nothing short of stunning, my love."

Will's eyes glimmer, gleam, shine. He beams, visibly relieved, and touches his lips to Hannibal's cheeks in thanks. He gently nudges his hip against Hannibal's as he passes, brushes their fingers together as he goes. "I know I took longer than expected. Get me up to speed."

"Ladies, after you," Hannibal says with a genteel sweep of his arm, and Margot and Alana, too, pass by. "In truth, darling, everything is almost done. But if you'd like to pour drinks for your guests and look over our work…"

Will nods but frowns as he crosses the threshold, and further, into the dining room; the click of his heels is even more obvious when it comes to a halt, and Will stands in silence as he takes in the table settings, the centerpieces, the lights. "Oh," he murmurs, so painfully pleased. "Hannibal, it's *beautiful."*

Hannibal bites back a purr, and pride swells fiercely within his chest as he returns to the rangetop, takes his place before the platters waiting to be arranged. "All our design. Ah—Jamal, Desireé, Pierre,

this is my partner—"

"Willa," Will says with a beaming smile, and turns away from the dining room. They all pause, clearly somewhat shocked; whether they assumed the term *partner* meant a visibly male beau, or whether it's because Willa is so different from their expectations, he cannot be certain. But they are all polite, interested, smile and offer greetings when Will returns to the kitchen, extracts a bottle of champagne and turns it forty-five degrees, loosens the wire cage, and deftly snags a kitchen towel with which to hold the cork as he rotates the bottle, and with a quiet hiss and subtle *pop*, pulls it free.

"Very nice," Margot says approvingly, and pats his shoulder as she passes. She snags a pair of white wine glasses, the bowls wider and allowing greater area in which the champagne can breathe. "Drink, honey?"

"Please," Alana replies with a grin. She brushes shoulders with Margot—both clad in jewel-toned cocktail dresses, simple but elegant things. If Hannibal is correct in assuming so, he'd say they both belong to, or were purchased by Margot.

Not quite the sort of thing a student's earnings would cover, but he would hardly begrudge Alana of that. "You both look lovely tonight—and I want to thank you for coming, of course."

"Wouldn't miss it." Margot smiles, nods, and gently holds up her glass for Alana and Will to clink together and sip. "To the birthday—uh, *they."*

Will snorts; giggles, and soon all of them are laughing. A smile pulls at Hannibal's mouth as he plates the last of the platters and puts them in the warming drawer, and then gathers the appetizers.

"Shall we lay these out here in the kitchen?" Hannibal asks.

"Probably best," Will agrees. "How's the pavlova looking?"

"Excellent. The flavors are mingling, and it'll be fresh for a few hours yet." Hannibal takes a glass of his own when offered, and hums at the pleasant, fizzy taste of genuine champagne. It's an indulgence, but one well worth the occasion. He sets it down; lays out the platters, and smiles when Will immediately jumps in to assist. "Ladies, help yourselves, of course. And Alana—have you decided where you'll pursue your residency?"

"You mean, am I going to save you from going it alone with Chilton?" She replies with a cheeky grin. "Actually… yes. I did decide to stick with Johns Hopkins." She raises one index finger. "And not only because Doctor Du Maurier promised me that Chilton wouldn't be my mentor. Though that helped."

"Of course," Hannibal agrees graciously. Though if Bedelia promised her that Chilton wouldn't be her mentor, it was surely to seal Alana's choice—and also, to lock in a competent assistant. "Johns Hopkins has an impeccable reputation, which…" Hannibal lowers his voice conspiratorially. "Even Doctor Chilton cannot diminish."

Alana snorts—and then promptly claps her hand over her nose and mouth. Margot, for her part, looks *delighted,* and Alana flushes red when Margot jostles her arm.

"Hannibal," Will says, though if he means to sound scolding, he certainly doesn't. He only glows with self-satisfied amusement when Hannibal shoots him a half-smile.

“Apologies, darling,” he says, and certainly doesn’t sound apologetic. “That was not very well done of me.”

“Uh-*huh,”* Will mutters under his breath, but is just as quickly interrupted by—“That’s the door again. Be right back.”

And so it goes—Eloise and her husband are the next to arrive, lighting the room with spirited and educational banter. Then arrives Bedelia, who mingles and drinks, but notably eats very little; Hannibal eyes her and considers the merits of her waifish figure being due to a low caloric intake. He decides to keep an eye on her when dinner comes, and hold off on being offended just yet. She did accept the invitation, after all.

Hannibal breaks from the group to answer the bell the next time it sounds. He’s pleased he did.

“Jack,” Hannibal says, and stands back for the Crawfords to enter. *“Bellissima.”*

She huffs, but grins, charmed. “Just Bella, Doctor Lecter.”

“Then I must insist you call me Hannibal.” He smiles, and yes, *this* is the opportunity he’s looked forward to. A hound who has so cluelessly wandered into the foxes’ den, unaware of the company he keeps. Hannibal takes Bella’s coat and doubles back for Jack’s; shakes his hand and nods, and lowers his voice when he says in confidence, “I cannot thank you enough for breaking up that unfortunate event between Doctor Gideon and Mason Verger. I can’t imagine what harm Will might’ve come to if it continued—and what you did to help Will regarding Freddie Lounds. I owe you a debt.”

“Not to spout a line, but all part of the job, Doctor,” Jack replies with a smile.

Hannibal nods, gestures with a turn of his hand, “Please, come in, make yourselves comfortable.”

Will looks up when they enter, and Hannibal watches his smile freeze, a brief flicker of something in his eyes that might be panic. But he never breaks, and it smooths over quickly, with all the professionalism of a seasoned social dancer. Of course, his identity is masked, and Hannibal revels in the counterbalanced moment when Jack pauses, obviously caught off-guard. If he suspected Will was actually the shadowed silhouette of his—well, suspect—then this has certainly thrown a wrench in the notion.

“Agent Crawford, Ambassador Crawford,” Will says warmly, and extracts himself from the group. He reaches out to shake Jack’s hand, then bounces forward to peck Bella on the cheek. He’s playing the part of a bubbly socialite fantastically so far, and it’s a strange but prideful joy to watch Will adapt as Hannibal does, a chameleon changing skins to suit needs and expectations.

Oh, once the time comes, he’ll be a fearsome thing to behold.

“Please, Will,” Bella replies. “Bella and Jack. Thank you for inviting us.” She looks to Hannibal with a smile. Aside, she adds, “Your home is beautiful. I think we may be due for a kitchen remodel.”

“Ah, well, if you find yourself in need of a designer, do let me know.” Hannibal snags two glasses from the counter and hands them over. “The kitchen here was in a desperate state when I first moved in. I’d be happy to offer advice on contractors and salespeople from which to purchase anything you need. It was something of a process to find reliable collaborators, but I always try to pass along the names of those who have proven to be competent and gracious.”

“I may just take you up on that.” Bella salutes gently with her glass; Hannibal does the same, and they drink. “Oh, Eloise! And Bedelia, good to see you. Did you happen to find someone else for your plus-one?”

“Yes, I did,” Bedelia replies smoothly, and Hannibal turns to her. Tilts his head. Strange that she didn’t mention it upon arrival and that they didn’t come together. “My apologies, Hannibal, I haven’t gotten her message whether she’s out of work yet. I wanted to confirm she’d be able to make it. No rest for the wicked, I’m afraid.”

Hannibal’s nostrils flare; a surprising misstep for a woman of Bedelia’s stature, but, he supposes, she did RSVP in acceptance of a plus-one. There is more than enough to go around, and certainly enough seats at the table. Though if she arrives during dinner, he’ll be much less impressed. “A notion I understand well. Please do let her know she’s welcome, even if she’s running a bit behind.”

Bedelia inclines her head; Will’s lips are pressed together, but he quickly relocates his attention to Margot, playing the part of an attentive friend. Of all their acquaintances, Will seems the least welcoming to Bedelia, though never enough to be considered rude. A conflict of personalities, perhaps. He can’t imagine Will feels any cause to be threatened.

The doorbell rings again. Bedelia checks her phone, but her brow creases, as clearly she has gone unanswered. Will slips between their guests and past Hannibal with a murmured, “I’ll get it,” and disappears from the kitchen.

Hannibal glances around; everyone seems to be occupied, the appetizers eaten, glasses full. Surely their guests can spare him a moment while he follows Will—

“Oh, Doctor Gideon, Annalise. Come in, come in; yikes, it’s getting really cold out there…”

Hannibal’s nostrils flare. Yes, right. Doctor Gideon. Well, a good thing Hannibal decided to follow. He catches Abel’s eye as he enters and offers a cordial incline of his head; takes his place at Will’s side and touches the tips of his fingers to the small of Will’s back, feeling the heat of his skin through the lace. “I can take that, my love.”

Will looks up with a quirk of his brow and a smile, but obligingly hands over Annalise’s coat; puffy, shiny black, with an ostentatious faux-fur ruff. Gideon’s is simpler, matted black and weatherproof. Sensible. Hannibal tucks them both away in the hall closet.

“Sorry we’re late,” Gideon replies, and there’s an edge to his voice that is just slightly *off*. “We were… stuck in traffic.”

Will smiles grimly. “Roads this time of year can get awful. Better to drive slow and arrive safe.”

“Couldn’t agree more.” Gideon blinks. Blinks again. “You changed your hair.”

Hannibal bites back a growl; it’s a simple observation, and an obvious one. Surely nothing to get agitated over. Still, he finds himself soothed when Will huffs through his nose and reaches out to hold Hannibal’s hand, draw him close. “Thought I’d try a new look.”

“Well, it suits you—”

Annalise, meanwhile, has her head craned back to observe the foyer. “Wow, this is really nice. A little dark, though, isn’t it?”

Now Hannibal is certainly irritated. And not the first time he's been completely unimpressed with Abel Gideon's wife. Her conduct leaves much to be desired, and clearly does for Gideon as well when he hisses, *"Anna."*

"Harder to let the sunlight in when the sun goes down at four o'clock," Will says mildly. His lips tip upward, but when Hannibal observes him in profile, there's no humor to his expression. "It's brighter in the kitchen, though. Warmer, too; right this way."

Will tugs Hannibal by the hand and offers a subtle squeeze. Hannibal inhales, and accepts the silent reminder of Will's thoughtful devotion as the balm it's meant to be; a soothing touch to the raised hackles of a beast. He allows himself to be settled by it.

"Smells awesome in here." Gideon crosses the threshold and looks around with interest. "Damn, Hannibal, no wonder you home cook everything."

"The kitchen is a symptom of my cooking, I'm afraid, not the other way around," Hannibal replies with a wry smile. "Beverage?"

"Oh, we're not drinking," Annalise cuts in before Abel can speak. Her smile is saccharine stretched thin. "We're watching our carbs."

What a blind, stupid sow. Why accept an invitation to a gathering knowing there will be food and beverages if she doesn't intend to eat? Hannibal's nostrils flare; Will's smile is slowly widening, and for his part, at least, he looks pleasantly amused. A certain chilly aloof humor that reminds Hannibal of Bedelia's brand of distant, high-bred grace.

Of course, Will is more hot-blooded. More direct, as he proves when he pointedly replies, "No problem at all, though—is that the royal 'we'? Abel, anything? You're sure?"

Undermining Annalise's dominion over her husband; well, Hannibal can hardly blame him. This is their home and their event, after all.

Abel bares his teeth. It's more of that than anything else, especially when Hannibal tracks the direction of his eyes: lingering on Jack Crawford with a certain bitter wariness. Hannibal did wonder how that particular interaction would fare, given that Jack was forced to detain Abel for his violence just a week ago. And, thanks to Hannibal, it will be fresh in Jack's mind.

"Ah, well, he's sure," Annalise says, and reaches out to pat Abel's chest just a *little* too hard, "Heart health waits for no man."

It's the wrong thing to say. At Hannibal's side, Will's shoulders tense; Hannibal presses his lips together, and when he looks to Will, he's averted his eyes. That clever smile is gone.

Will clears his throat. His fingers flex, though they have nothing to hold, as he'd abandoned his glass when he went to attend to the door—

"Well, I'm gonna get something. Hannibal?"

"Perhaps in a moment, darling." Hannibal's teeth click together in his mouth; he can feel how terribly aware he is of them. "Would you mind checking with Jamal and seeing if he needs any assistance with the last of the platters?"

"On it."

Gideon's brows rise, but he immediately seems to grasp that Annalise has said something especially offensive. Over her head, he shoots Hannibal an apologetic and long-suffering glance.

Annalise looks up at him with a deep frown that puts creases around her eyes, notably not her forehead or her cheeks. Ah, the price of eternal youth. Perhaps not so eternal. Ugliness has a way of revealing itself from within, if only in abhorrent, socially ostracizing behavior. "What?"

"Willa's father passed from a heart attack at the age of forty," Hannibal says softly, dangerously, with only the barest hint of an apologetic smile. He's not apologetic on Will's behalf; he's *thoroughly* incensed on it. "I would say they understand the concept quite well. Of course, if you have dietary restrictions, please feel free to ask me about any of the dishes; Will and I made them all, and we should be able to tell you what's in them. I do also have seltzer water to drink if you'd prefer." He watches as Will jumps in to help carry platters to the table; balanced on his forearm as he takes careful steps in his slender stiletto heels— "Excuse me, Willa needs my assistance."

Hannibal steps in at once, placing his hand underneath one of the two trays Will is attempting to carry, and lifting it free from his support. "I've got it, darling."

Will exhales softly; his expression is one of a distant, soft-edged melancholy, blunted only by time. "Thanks." Then, "Sorry I jumped out of there. That was probably pretty rude of me."

"Perhaps abrupt, but not impolite," Hannibal replies. He inclines his head, and follows Will as he passes into the dining room.

It's dimmer in here, the overhead lights not yet illuminated to welcome their guests. There is only the glow from the string lights and the muted sound of conversation as they unburden themselves. The table has truly come together; certainly the not first dinner event Hannibal has held, but aesthetically, it may be the best.

Will turns, and Hannibal reaches; catches him gently by the arm, and Will comes to a halt with almost no pressure at all. He's still dejected, discontent. It's unsettling; Hannibal would prefer to see him confident and strong a thousand times over. "Will…"

"I know she didn't mean anything by it," Will mutters. "It's not like she knew. It's not even about her. I just…" He inhales through his nose, and lets it out with a flutter of lashes. His lips parted on that exhale, brows drawn together. "I think my dad really would have liked you."

Will always seems to surprise him in moments like this one. Hannibal wonders if there will ever be a time when Will becomes predictable to him, and certainly hopes there's not.

He cups Will's cheeks in his palms, draws him near, touches his mouth to Will's forehead in a chaste but loving kiss. "I believe it would have been mutual."

Will closes his eyes and hums, contented, and the sound of it vibrates against Hannibal's lips; touches his chest, two warm points of contact that curl into the breast of Hannibal's waistcoat, just… holding. "I'm not sulking, I promise," Will says softly. "I just miss him sometimes. Holidays, birthdays, stuff like that."

Gently, as to not disturb Will's makeup, Hannibal smooths his thumbs over his highlighted cheekbones. "From time to time, I think of what Mischa would be like as an adult woman. The time passes, mylimasis, but you will always miss them still. It's how we know we loved them."

“You’re right,” Will sighs, a bare breath; his hands flatten once more, and he rubs upward to Hannibal’s shoulders. He tilts his chin for a careful kiss. When they part, his arms fall to his sides.

He lifts his head; and oh, he is lovely, with his bright eyes and his dense curls and the pale vee of his chest that disappears beneath the blazer, the skirt that flares around his narrow hips. Even more beautiful when his gaze sharpens like a blade, when he takes a breath and forces it out and dons the mantle of the monster Hannibal loves.

“So,” he says with a smile full of teeth, “Shall we eat?”

A knock. Both Will and Hannibal turn toward the source of the sound; the front door.

“That must be Bedelia’s guest.” Will blinks and glances back toward the light of the kitchen. Their unsuspecting sheep mill about inside. It would be so terribly neglectful to leave them unattended. “I can round people up for dinner, if you want to get the door.”

“Divide and conquer,” Hannibal replies, and it succeeds in making him laugh. “I’ll return in a moment.”

Hannibal is not above admitting his annoyance to himself, though Bedelia’s actions are far eclipsed by Annalise Gideon’s. However, it’s in his best interests to stay on Bedelia’s good side. She’d make a powerful ally within the walls of the hospital, and the politics of psychiatry promise to be more challenging than those of the emergency department. If forgiving a passing offense is what he must do to stay in her good graces…

He answers the door.

The woman on the other side looks not so unlike Bedelia herself—tall, slender, with pale eyes and an angular face. Her hair is short, military-clean lines around her ears and at her nape, with longer bangs that are easily styled to seem effortless. She’s dressed in a sharply-tailored blue pantsuit, long wool coat unbuttoned. She doesn’t seem at all bothered by the wind or the cold, though her cheeks are flushed high with color.

She smiles. “Hi, you must be Doctor Lecter. I’m so sorry I’m late, I was deposed in court.”

Hannibal steps back to allow her room for entry. “That’s quite alright. Justice never sleeps, but the evening is young for the rest of us.”

She smiles, pleased, as he takes her coat and gestures for her to go ahead. “We’re just down the hall, here. You made it just in time for dinner.”

“I’ve heard such good things. Thank you.” She heads through the doorway, where it seems Will has just made the announcement regarding the meal, standing at the head of the room.

She looks to Will curiously, just as the others look to her, and Hannibal heads her off. “I’m afraid I missed catching up with Bedelia so far in the commotion—so, what do you do for work?”

Bedelia smiles when she sees her. Jack Crawford goes quiet and still in a way Hannibal has never seen him before. And Will, too, is frozen as he stares at the woman who has just entered their home.

“You know what, I just realized I haven’t introduced myself,” she replies, and smartly holds out her hand to Hannibal. “Supervisory Special Agent Kade Prurnell, FBI. I’m the head of the Behavioral Analysis Unit.”

Oh, well this *is* a surprise. God does so enjoy his little jokes, and Hannibal is *so* looking forward to this one.

He takes her hand and shakes it firmly. “Doctor Hannibal Lecter. And my partner, Willa.”

Will blinks, eyes wide. Kade’s eyes fall upon that expression like Lady Justice judging his sins before he’s even said a word.

But who is a lawman to weigh the guilt of a wolf?

And then Will blinks, and blooms with warmth and approaches, and reaches out to shake Kade’s hand just the same. “Nice to meet you,” Will says, and when he smiles, he radiates the confidence of one who knows their place within their home, and looks to Hannibal. If only he were in on the joke, *if only*—“So glad you could join us for dinner.”

And dinner is quite something.

Their guests are appropriately awed at the spread they’ve laid out, enough small plates to feed a small army, let alone those in their dining room. With Will at the table’s head, Margot sits to his left, followed by Alana, Eloise and her husband, and Bedelia. Hannibal sits at the other end, furthest from the doorway, flanked by Kade and Jack (neither of whom look thrilled to be seated together), Bella, Annalise, and—well. Hannibal is keeping *very* close attention on Abel Gideon, seated as he is on Will’s right-hand side. So, too, it seems, is Annalise.

Wine is poured; for a while discussion is the same polite chatter Hannibal has weathered ever since he moved to Baltimore and established himself among their upper echelon. Kade and Bedelia fall among the more conservative conversationalists, with Eloise, Alana, and Bella more outspokenly opinionated. Margot proves herself to be quite different in company than she is when in private with Will: she watches and listens, and when her words slip into a lull in conversation, it’s with the same sharpness of a blade between ribs. She’s exceedingly bright, that one. Not for the first time, Hannibal pays silent appreciation to Will’s choice of friends.

“Heart tartare,” Bella Crawford says, frowning down at the dish before her. She hasn’t denied it entirely, which puts her above Annalise by a head and shoulders, and somewhere below Eloise, who has already begun to eat hers. She seems intrigued by the concept, at the very least. “What kind of heart?”

Hannibal turns his attention to her pleasantly. “Veal.” A young jogger in Washington who nearly caused a traffic accident with his inattentiveness, then turned his temper on the cars.

At that, Bella’s expression turns conflicted. “I’ve always considered eating veal to be a cruel practice.”

Before Hannibal can answer her protests, Margot smoothly interjects. Hannibal notes with pleasant surprise that she has already almost finished the course, and until now had been bemusedly watching Alana mentally wrangle with what she was eating. “It depends on the farm. Mass-produced veal, yes, I agree. Factory farming is almost unbearably cruel, entirely for profit, and not about the welfare of the animals. However, with the farm-to-table movement, we’ve seen greater demand for ethical

butchering—calves raised on the pasture with company, though usually fed formula instead of milk, since milk is another staple farm product. Most farmers don't see the point in feeding a male calf destined for slaughter with their profits."

"A male calf?" Bella echoes. She leans forward; actually looks intrigued. "Is veal always male?"

"Almost always," Margot replies with an easy nod. "I'd say ninety percent of veal comes from the male calves of dairy cows, since they can't produce milk and they're usually a lower-quality beef in adulthood compared to an angus breed. For family farms, they might raise them to adulthood for beef, but in the food industry? Much less likely. So in a way, yeah, it's still about maximizing profits for the farmers, because cows are almost always a loss on a small scale unless you have a few thousand heads and multi-million dollar machinery. But ethical veal is on the rise, for sure."

Margot tilts her head as she looks down at the plate before her, the cubes of rich red meat. Will watches her curiously; her eyes flick to him, and when he subtly nods, lifts and raises a shoulder in a shrug, she nods to herself and continues.

"The color of this is really red—this is seriously fresh, and was either slaughtered today or frozen within an hour of the slaughter. There's almost no fat to it, which means the muscle is strong. This was almost definitely a pastured, well-exercised, and well-fed calf. Definitely older than a bob-calf. This guy was at least six months old. And…" She scoops the last bite of the pastry cup onto her fork and pops it into her mouth. From the movement of her jaw, Hannibal can see the way she deliberately tastes, tongue to her hard palate. Margot finishes chewing and swallows. "The flavor of this is extremely smooth. It's not acidic at all. However the animal was slaughtered, it might not have even known it was coming. Incredibly humane circumstances, at least by farming standards."

"That's astounding," Eloise says, visibly impressed. "Miss Verger, if you'd ever like to be a guest speaker on agricultural ethics, I know a few professors who would love to hear your expertise."

Margot flushes gently, almost as though she has only just realized the spectacle. Will reaches out and touches her arm, encouraging. She smiles.

"Well," Bella says with a decided nod, "That's enough for me. I've always said I'd try any food at least once."

Hannibal cannot restrain his good humor. He takes a sip of his Bordeaux, and when he glances down the table, he sees Will doing the same. "Well, that's certainly another to check off the list." Sets his glass down. "Yes, Margot, I employ an ethical butcher. I'm fortunate to be friends with several local chefs, who passed on the names of their suppliers to me. I've personally been to their farms to inspect the circumstances; I'm afraid I'm quite the, shall we say, pain in the ass. I insist on it."

Margot raises her glass in a perfectly contented salute. "You've done better than I have. I'd like to tackle the issue of our suppliers, but Da—my father is much less interested in my opinion, compared to my brother's. And when it comes to meat, of course, Mason prefers pigs."

"Why's that?" Jack asks with a frown. Gideon's face, too, is solemn.

And Margot's, sullen. "Probably because they don't have horns and they can't kick him when he tests how deep their fat cap is."

Jack's eyebrows creep upward. "And how would one test something like that?"

“Usually, you’d ultrasound them,” Will replies, calmly cutting through the individually-sized Wellington upon his plate. Hannibal bites back a smile; he’s gone in for seconds. Excellent. High praise, indeed. “In Mason’s case, he prefers the old way, which is to stab them. In the back, usually, as deeply as he can with a four-inch blade. Fat doesn’t bleed; where the blood starts is where the meat starts.” Will takes a bite. For a moment, his lashes dip with pleasure before he swallows. And stay low, as he looks sidelong beneath them. His smile is gone. “But the average depth of fat is an inch and a half, right, Margot?”

She nods, just once, and says nothing more.

Bedelia and Bella make quiet sounds of disdain. Kade Prurnell’s brows creep upward. “Isn’t that animal cruelty?”

“Sounds par for the course, to me,” Annalise says with a twisted frown, fists clench on the tabletop. She turns up her nose as Gideon shifts in place; as Margot looks down and Alana huffs a breath.

Will looks up and meets her eyes. He glances at Margot, to the velcro cast she even now still wears, and says, “Mason does a lot of cruel things, Agent Prurnell. He didn’t learn all of them himself, but when people like that have power like that, there’s not a whole lot anyone can do to make things right.”

Kade’s eyes narrow. She licks her lips and leans forward. Pauses, then… speaks. “The justice system exists to make things right.” She looks to Margot. At her arm. “But it requires a brave testimony.”

Margot hums quietly. Smiles, but Hannibal knows that smile. It says exactly what he thinks: *How quaint. An idealistic agent of a federal agency.*

“Forgive me, Agent Prurnell, but if a brave testimony were all it took, the problem would have been resolved when I was ten years old.” Margot holds her attention, holds her gaze, and only lets it drop when Will reaches over to pour her more wine. Margot shoots him an appreciative smile, a fond gesture for a well-loved friend, and takes another serving of the heart tartare. Slices off a bite with the side of her fork. “There’s a reason men of privilege are overwhelmingly likely to be psychopaths. They protect each other. And it’s only when the offenses get personal that any of them get dealt with —usually by one of their own.”

An astute observation, of course: but the table grows contemplative, quietly charged with tension. And in that quiet, Hannibal has free reign to watch the flicker of light over Will’s face, the darkness shadowing his eyes. Will’s hands pull slowly from the table, into his lap. His shoulders tighten.

And Hannibal sits up a little straighter—

Until Alana does. She looks up, and back down again. To Margot. To Will. To Hannibal, and… “Alright,” she blurts out, like she simply can’t hold it in anymore. “I gotta ask about this painting.”

Will’s eyes widen; he leans forward, animated at once, lips pressed firmly together, but Hannibal can see the beginnings of a smile as he levels Alana with an accusing finger. “No, don’t. Don’t even get him started.”

And who is Hannibal to disappoint? He clears his throat, and Will’s look is long-suffering. A grin steals over his face, all teeth, and he says, *“Well.* If you *must* know about Leda…”

Transitioning from dinner to dessert takes time; though they have the help in the form of Hannibal's hired extra hands, it still takes a while to clear everything away and re-set the table with the dishes waiting upon the mantle.

"Willa," Kade says, as soon as the commotion begins. Her smile is small, pleasant, and Hannibal slows his steps as he carries a platter to the kitchen. "Do you mind showing me to the ladies' room?"

Will's eyes are shuttered, his expression unreadable beyond the surface of his placid, pleasant hostess charade. "Yeah, sure!" He looks to Hannibal, and Hannibal's fingers tighten on the plate when he, too, cannot peer beneath Will's persona. "I'll be right back, ok?"

"Of course." Hannibal replies. "Dishes are a simple matter. Take your time." *And I will be counting the seconds you're gone, to be safe.*

He watches with sharp eyes as Will goes, aurally follows the sound of clicking high heels, even as he brings the used plates to the kitchen. Washing china is a delicate process best done by hand; he sends the others to straighten the table while he starts the water, grateful that he can glower to his heart's desire with his back to their refined company, the wire strainer at his elbow the only fellow he cares to have.

At least until he's interrupted.

"Gotta say," Margot drawls as she approaches and leans back against against the counter, "this is the first dinner I've been to that actually gave me time to digest before dessert. I appreciate that."

Hannibal suppresses his flicker of annoyance; after all, this quiet time is hardly quiet when his house is full of people. Margot's interruption is not an interruption at all, but rather a conversation he opted-into by nature of allowing these people over his threshold.

At least Margot has the gift of complex thought.

"I prefer to give a fifteen-minute respite for guests to refill their drinks and converse. I've always found it makes for a more pleasant experience, and far less cleanup at the very end of the evening."

"Yeah," she says, "that's the other thing. It's the first dinner I've been to where the host washed their own dishes."

"There's a common turn of phrase that explains my reasoning, I believe," Hannibal replies; between the sound of the water and the sound of the milling voices, he's finding it difficult to keep an ear out for the sound of Will's return. "If you want something done right…"

"And yet, so many often don't." Margot looks to him, sidelong. "But I guess it makes sense that you do. Will wouldn't like you if you didn't."

That, at least, instills some small amount of pride. It's true on two fronts, though Margot doesn't know how true.

Hannibal pauses, for just a moment. Here he is, alone with access to Will's most trusted confidante. If there is anyone alive who knows what Will is up to, it's sure to be her. And though Hannibal wants to respect Will's right to privacy, well. It's only good sense to try to get ahead of the mind of his beloved. It's such a complicated thought process, after all; he can't waste any time on the luxury of inaction.

“Margot,” Hannibal says, and resumes his washing. He pitches his voice to be quiet, concerned, a man fretting over the one he loves in a private moment, rather than a public one that might seem more overbearing. “If there were something going on with Will, would you tell me?”

“If there were something going on that qualified me being concerned, that I knew about, and you didn’t know about?” Margot asks, and sets her glass down beside her. It’s half-empty, though she makes no move toward getting a refill. Her brow raises. “Nothing personal, but—probably not.”

Ah, well. At least she’s honest. Loyal. Hannibal can’t entirely fault her for it.

“Don’t get me wrong. If it was out of his depth, maybe. But there’s not a lot of things out of Will’s depth. He’s the smartest person I have ever met.” Her eyes are green as the empty champagne bottles; they glint, hollow and haunting in the light. “There is so much more to him than I think anyone understands. Even you or me.”

Hannibal passes the dishes from sink to strainer, wet to his forearms. He considers the words before he says them, but in the end… “There are some that claim to know him better than you or I ever could.”

“Yeah. Claim.” Hannibal takes the moment to be silent; does not allow himself to show offense as her eyes focus on the doorway, on the murmur of voices still going in the dining room. There is a part of Margot Verger that has intimately attuned itself to knowing around exactly *which* corners danger lurks. He must count himself fortunate, then, that he has this entire open room where he may hide in plain sight. “I know that Will is… not like most people. But anyone I’ve ever met that thinks Will is *just* one thing always seem to forget that he isn’t. Neither are any of us. We *all* have choices to make.”

Margot slides her glass from side to side on the counter, just an inch back and forth, left and right, like a pendulum counting the seconds.

Each second marks another moment of Will’s absence.

She takes a breath and blows it out, and in the vacant kitchen, she turns to face Hannibal. “Look, Doc. I just know he loves you like he’s never loved anything. There’s not a single thing on this earth that Will wouldn’t do for you.”

“He shares the same regard for you.” Of this, Hannibal is certain—a different love, but a deep one. The love of family. She is, at this point (and outside himself) the only family Will has left.

“I know he loves me,” Margot says. She wears her expression like a porcelain mask. It doesn’t flicker. Doesn’t chip. “But it’s not the same.”

Hannibal finishes the last of the dishes and lifts them from the sink, puts them into a wire strainer to drip dry. “Of course, the love of family—”

“That’s not what I mean.” Margot picks up her wine, and without hesitation, drains the rest of it. She sighs as she steps closer, turns on the water, and rinses the empty glass under the sink. Cleans it carefully with a dish rag and soap, and the dregs of the Bordeaux are diluted until the clear overpowers the pink tint. She sets it into the strainer beside the Minton china. Accepts the towel Hannibal offers to dry her hands and nods, just once. She lowers her eyes from his, but not in submission. “There’s a lot of things Will would do for me. But I’ll be honest, Doc. I don’t *want* to know what he’d do for you, and I hope it never comes to that.”

Margot's shoes do not provide her a silent exit, but she leaves silence in her wake. But it doesn't last—for Will rounds the corner with a serene, unbothered expression, though his cheeks are flushed and pink. Hannibal frowns as he looks up, reaches out to beckon him closer; Will's hands, too, are chilled, and he smells faintly of smoke.

"Sorry it took so long," Will murmurs. "Mrs. Komeda went out for a cigarette and wanted to discuss my postgraduate plans. Did you know her husband works for The Boston Globe? She thinks I should apply to Harvard for their Master's in Journalism."

He would expect nothing less from Eloise. Hannibal huffs his amusement, his mind still whirring from the many implications of his own conversation with Margot. He rubs warmth back into Will's hands, if only to see the smile he gets when he does it.

Such a simple thing, a simple comfort and simple pleasure. There is so little that is simple about his relationship with Will. Time only seems to make it more complicated.

No. Complex, not complicated. There are many facets to this love they share, but Hannibal is determined to never consider the entire affair a problem in and of itself. Complicated implies a necessary solution. Complex implies something more delicate and deliberate. He prefers the nuance of it.

It's a nuance he considers now. "Well, if you find yourself considering it, I'm sure a relocation would not be out of the question. The matching for residencies is not in quite yet—I could always apply for an exception to Massachusetts General Hospital."

Will blinks. Blinks again. His painted lips part and close and part upon a stunned, "I, uh. What?"

Hannibal has no desire to leave this house, not when it's only recently reached his satisfaction. And yet, the thought of Will going away to pursue his education—or, indeed, subjecting him to something lesser in pursuit of Hannibal's own convenience… "The matter is up for discussion, if at any point you think it's something you'd like to explore."

Will stares at him in silence.

Hannibal lifts Will's hands with his own, brings them to his chest. He ducks his chin to brush his lips over them, savors the contrast of cold and warm, of soft skin and rough knuckles, small workman's scars and his lovely manicure. Now that Hannibal has found Will Graham, and knows what it would mean to lose him, there is little he would not do to keep him near. "Is it something you would like to discuss?"

Will swallows. "I think, um." Clears his throat, lifts his head, and blinks like he's trying to mask the fact that Hannibal has taken him off-guard. But there's no hiding from one another, it seems—except for when the secret is not one they want to keep. Only then does it become impossible to shed. "Well, not… now."

"Of course," Hannibal replies. "Perhaps later tonight."

Will nods, and there's a note of wonder to it; hesitance, like perhaps he doesn't believe that Hannibal would be open to such a thing, despite all they've discussed regarding other changes to their lives. A change of location seems the least of them, and…

Perhaps it would be an opportunity.

He brushes his mouth over Hannibal's cheek, and when Hannibal turns into it, his lips taste faintly of chemical dye, and more sweetly of wine. But Hannibal's savoring is short—after all, they still have guests to attend to.

"Shall we return to the dining room?" Hannibal asks. "I'm sure our guests are almost ready for dessert."

"I'm ready to be *done,"* Will says softly, with a secretive smile. Touches Hannibal's shoulders, and lets his hands rest there. It's soothing, somehow. "And I'm sure you are, too. You barely slept last night."

He blinks. "I didn't realize I disturbed you."

"You didn't. Meaning, you didn't move at all, and then you were up early. I know your tells." A wry smirk; and oh, what a humorous thought that is. "Let's finish up, and then we'll clean up, and…" Will's eyes crinkle at the corners. "I'll do my best to tire you out before bed. Okay?"

Will tugs at Hannibal's collar; it shifts around his throat more like a collar willingly placed, or perhaps a noose of his own making. Will fusses, an affectionate tell of his own. His mind is clearly still whirring with the suggestion of a discussion, but he hides it admirably.

"Very well," Hannibal replies. Indeed, the thought of this dinner being over and done and having private time to themselves is… motivational. Closing this mental gap between them with physicality; Hannibal's hands close around Will's hips at the thought of it, beneath the flowing fabric of the jacket's attached draping. Will's slacks are silky against his palms; the promise of his hip bones, sharp. "I may have to take you up on that, my love."

"Good." Will's smile widens. "I want you to."

"After."

"After," he agrees. Slips his hand into Hannibal's, and his fingers are no longer cold. "Shall we?"

The dessert receives many compliments—a three-tiered rosewater pavlova with mascarpone and greek yogurt cream, layered with fig, pomegranate, and persimmon, topped pistachios and a honey balsamic syrup. It's a truly lovely arrangement, aesthetically pleasing to a fault, and the flavors and textures mesh well. When their guests seek to fawn at his feet, Hannibal turns their attention elsewhere. This particular course, after all, was entirely Will's design.

It's for that reason Hannibal's eyes linger on him. But, of course, it seems most of their guests are equally enamored, and not just Abel Gideon. Will has handled this evening with grace and poise, sharp-witted conversation and commanding elegance. He is, in many ways, Hannibal's perfect complement as a partner. He deserves to be seen that way.

And yet, as though the tables have turned entirely, this time it is Hannibal sitting quietly and wondering at symbolism; whether it was a conscious decision on Will's part to incorporate persimmons, now sweet and fully ripe. Whether it was solely a coincidence to the Beltway overpass

where this arguably all began: The Hanged Man's noose tied to a post above on Persimmon Tree Road.

He doesn't know. Will gives nothing away but for a sweet smile and genuine conversation as the evening winds down. Hannibal thinks incessantly on what Margot said of Will, and Hannibal knows it's true: there's more to Will Graham than he's ever been able to quantify, qualify, or explain. Historically, he's been content to wait out those mysteries, to peel them back one by one. But now, with Jack Crawford on one side of the table and Kade Prurnell on the other, with Abel Gideon sitting at Will's right hand and Margot at his left, and their greatest adversaries seated between them…

Perhaps these secrets are festering to the point of infection. If Hannibal's continued silence is pushing them apart, then, well—he's already changed so many of his plans for Will's sake. What's one more alteration?

When the plates are nearly clear and their guests are seated back heavily in their chairs, Eloise snags the last of her champagne and stands. "A quick toast, if you please," she says pleasantly, and the others listen in. "To Hannibal, and to Will Graham—you've made my dear friend very happy, darling, and I wish every happiness to you both."

Will sits straight and tall within his chair at the head of the table; his hands are folded primly on the surface. He smiles. "Thank you, Mrs. Komeda."

"It's been a wonderful evening, the food has been sublime, and the company excellent. I do hope we'll be doing this again at some point."

Hannibal hums his amusement and his agreement and raises his glass. The others do the same, followers to the last. "Perhaps we'll have more time to plan for a more grand affair," he says, and shoots Will a fond glance. "Perhaps for graduation."

Will flashes his teeth. "If not before."

Hannibal inclines his head, seemingly defeated; their guests twitter with laughter, clever herd.

"It's been an excellent evening," Jack Crawford chimes in, and Bella nods enthusiastically at his side. Jack's attention slips from Hannibal to Will. "Thank you for welcoming us into your home."

"It's been our pleasure, Agent Crawford," Will replies warmly, and over the top of the centerpieces, he meets Hannibal's eyes. "And we hope everyone has a safe and peaceful holiday with their families. Oh—and be on the lookout when the time comes; you certainly haven't seen the last of us."

Smiles and thanks all around, of course. Incredibly pedestrian. Predictable to a fault, but as their guests round up to go, gather their coats and the leftovers that Will just *insists* they take with them —"It's too much for just me and Hannibal, please, I'd hate it to spoil; eat it for Christmas Eve lunch tomorrow so you don't have to cook!"—he handles every interaction with individualized attention and grace. As Hannibal cleans, Will insists on walking others to the door to bid goodbyes, or trading off on Hannibal's place at the sink. Even Bedelia seems reluctantly impressed by the time she leaves. Kade Prurnell's forehead is creased with thought, but Hannibal knows the look she's worn has only deepened since her conversation with Margot. She thanks him for the food, apologizes for her lateness, and slips away, and the servers not long after her (all with a generous wage and holiday bonus. They leave with smiles).

Abel and Annalise Gideon go with surprising quiet; from what Hannibal can glean once Annalise heads for the car, Abel hangs back to murmur an apology; his expression is deeply unhappy, Will's

even and calm. Hannibal watches subtly from the kitchen threshold as Will reaches out to pat the outside of Abel's arm, comforting forgiveness. When it falls away and the doorknob turns, Hannibal returns to his work with a bitter taste in his mouth.

Margot and Alana are the last to go. Will lingers in the doorway with them until almost all the dishes are done; when at last Hannibal hears the door close, there's a keen sense of relief. At the sound of the latch, the tension of his own social graces leaves his shoulders—until he hears Will's quiet noise of dissatisfaction.

He crosses the threshold, and stops just inside with a heavy sigh. Will pulls the Louboutins off and sets them near the leather armchair in the corner. His expression of blissful relief is… captivating. Almost suggestive, if Hannibal were not familiar with the true ease of pain Will undergoes when freed from his self-imposed restraints.

"God, it's nice to be on my own feet," Will murmurs. Wiggles his toes. Then he approaches, and the leonine quality to his gait is at full force as he flocks to Hannibal. "I think Mrs. Komeda left her gloves; she put them down when she was smoking and I just found them on the front step. Can you send her a message?"

Ah. A simple thing. "Yes, of course," he replies, and when Will finds his place at Hannibal's side, such sweet relief it is. He is warm and lax and beautiful, and they are *finally* alone. His eyes rove from Will's slender body to the vee in his blazer, upward to Will's hair. Hannibal reaches out and weaves his fingers into it; Will tips his head back with a blissful sound as Hannibal feels the shape of his scalp, the crown and curve downward until—

"Aha. There it is," Hannibal says, tracing his index finger over the tightly-woven braid at the nape of Will's neck, and the many bobby pins securing the base of his curls to it. An ingenious little design. "That's quite clever."

"Did it surprise you?" Will asks. He leans back into the cradle of Hannibal's palm as one might sprawl upon a hammock—entirely relaxed, and entirely trusting that Hannibal will bear his weight.

"Entirely. I assume this is what you and Margot perfected when she visited the other night?"

Will grins. "Got it in one." He purrs when Hannibal tugs him closer and nuzzles at his temple; inhales the scent of his own shampoo and remembers that this, *this* is contentment. This is the home they've built, the relationship they've built. A tango for two, give and take, and at the end of the night, it is theirs and their alone.

Hannibal suspects they've *both* been especially self-serving lately. Perhaps some give and take is exactly what they need.

"I seem to recall a proposition," Hannibal purrs. "That you would tire me out before bed. And being that it's your birthday and I haven't had a proper chance to spoil you today, I have a few ideas."

Will laughs. Grins, genuinely. "Oh yeah?

"Absolutely." His hand curls around Will's slender waist; pushes back, until his palm is splayed over the thin lace that covers Will's spine. "Starting with getting you out of this blazer to spare its life, so that you might wear it another time and stun me again."

Will reaches back; snags Hannibal's wrist and pulls him away. He growls quietly, but not when Will drags him around to the front—to the large, single button holding the jacket together. Ready to be

undone at any moment, slip and leave Will so nearly bare…

Hannibal undoes it, and Will holds his eyes as he shrugs it off. Tosses it, and lets it slip down the chair and puddle in the cushion, sure to be wrinkled if left unattended. He leaves it.

The bralette is vermilion red, barely a band to go around Will's ribs, and thin mesh that does nothing to hide the shape of Will's nipples. His pants, Hannibal can see now, are hip-huggers, form-fitting in a way that is molded to the shapely curve of Will's ass.

Hannibal growls softly; a selfish thought, this, but it's so very fortunate that Will's skirt hid his derrière from view. He is a beautiful, vexing creature. That much is undeniable. And, well, Hannibal is a tolerant man in many ways, but if he'd had to watch Abel Gideon openly glower at Will's—

Hannibal's hands close around Will's fragile ribs, and Will reaches back to fiddle with the bobby pins holding his hair in place; bit by bit, his curls come frazzled and free, until even the strand left wavy from the braid is loose around his shoulders and chest, tickling idly at Hannibal's knuckles. And, oh, Hannibal enjoyed the difference he saw, but *this* is something else altogether, as Will stands in the middle of their cluttered kitchen with his wild hair and his sharp eyes; a sweet bit of mesh and tight-wrapped pants, and…

Will reaches idly to his ears and takes the earrings from them—exorbitantly expensive, but oh, Hannibal loves the way Will looks in red rubies, lavish with diamonds. Will is mindful; he tucks them into the pocket of his slacks and slips his hands up Hannibal's chest. He undoes buttons from the collar down, just enough until it gapes open, still trapped beneath the waistcoat. Parts the halves enough that he can slide his fingers through the thick, coarse hair. He purrs, lashes lowered, and curls his fingers closed. Tugs, just enough to tease.

"So," Will murmurs playfully, "Are you going to take me here? Or to the couch? Where do you want me?"

A quiet snarl rips from Hannibal's chest. Tempestuous thing, and tempting to boot. "I want everything you have to give." And it's true: he does. He's had so much of Will already…

But not all of him.

"Upstairs." Hannibal rumbles. "Our bed. I'll lock up quickly and meet you there."

Will leans in for a kiss with a nod and an assenting hum, a noise of pleasure. "You already have everything from me, you know."

Hannibal's fingertips trail from Will's ribs over the flinching, fluttering muscles in his waist and belly, ghost over the front of his slacks, which are starting to grow warm and full with the swell of his erection. "Mm," Hannibal murmurs; heat rises in his cheeks, eyes heavy-lidded as he strokes his knuckles over Will's trapped cock to feel the given gasp against his mouth. His teeth ache. He *wants.* "Not yet."

Will murmurs mindless assent, nuzzles at Hannibal's cheek, but—

He pauses. Pulls back, just enough to meet Hannibal's eyes directly, head tilted. His pupils widen slowly, eclipsing the blue of his irises, and his gaze flickers between Hannibal's in a grasping attempt to read truth there, read his intent. Will's palms flatten on Hannibal's chest. "Wait—?"

Hanibal bares his teeth in a slow, warm smile; nudges Will toward the doorway. "Go."

Will shudders out a breath between parted, painted lips; eyes wide and almost wounded, but hot with desire as they drag over Hannibal's body. His intrigue is tangible, but he does as he's told. He snags the Louboutins from the floor and his jacket from the chair, carrying them upstairs while Hannibal turns to check the windows, the doors, the fireplace in the study—all taken care of. What platters remain can wait until morning.

He checks the front door and finds it locked, sets the alarm and glances down at Mrs. Komeda's gloves on a table just inside the entryway. He'll send her a message in the morning.

Right now, he has much more pressing matters at hand.

Hannibal ascends the staircase in the dark, eyes fixed on the glow that shines through the doorway of their bedroom. When he crosses the threshold, Will is seated on the edge of the bed, and he looks up when Hannibal enters.

Will watches ravenously as Hannibal undoes the buttons of his waistcoat, pads by Will on his way to the closet to hang it up. Will's gaze is heavy on his back when he sheds his shirt, unbuckles his belt, and Hannibal smiles to himself when he hears the telltale sound of movement.

Will molds himself against Hannibal's back, tucks his fingers into the waist of Hannibal's pants and works them down over his hips, fingers dipping beneath the elastic band of his boxer-briefs. Mouths at Hannibal's shoulders, drags his teeth over bare flesh; he grabs, touches, insatiable. Hannibal catches one of Will's hands in his own and presses it down, flattens it against his own abdomen and hums at the feel of it.

"Darling," Hannibal murmurs, "how do you feel about taking the lead tonight?"

Will's hands go still. He sheathes his teeth. Kisses Hannibal's shoulder, a chaste press of lips. His heart pounds against Hannibal's back. "I've taken control before."

"And it was hugely enjoyable experience for us both. But I'm sure you know that's not what I mean." Hannibal turns; Will releases him reluctantly, almost uncertain, almost shy when Hannibal turn to look at him. There's a red tint to his cheeks, eyes lowered to Hannibal's chest.

There are so few things that fluster Will anymore. In fact, Hannibal had been under the impression that he had shed *all* his apprehensions about their sex life, released his inhibitions to the wind. It's a curious reaction, but whether it's because Will simply doesn't want to, or sees some sort of barricade to it—

"You would…" Will starts, and his voice dies out. He licks his lips. "You would let me?"

He's as beautiful in his hesitation as he is in confidence, but Hannibal would see his beloved unleashed, as unchained as he had been in the woods. He would have the commanding grasp of hands, Will's weight bearing him down. He would have it now, at twenty-one, just as Hannibal wants to have it from Will at forty. Wants it always. And if Will is amenable, why should he deny himself the knowledge of Will's body in any and *every* way he can have it?

"Let you?" Hannibal replies. His hands settle on Will's shoulders, slip beneath the fragile straps to knead the tense muscles at the base of his neck. Will melts into his touch with a soft, relieved moan that fills Hannibal's belly with fond warmth. "We're a partnership of equals. *Letting* you implies that I am somehow unsatisfied or reluctant with the arrangement, and neither of those things are true."

Will huffs; he looks past Hannibal, behind him, to the—

Ah.

Hannibal turns them both so they can see their reflections together in the mirror, suspended across from the bed. They look good together, truly; two attractive people who are comfortable with one another. But Hannibal doesn't have to guess why this suggestion has taken Will off-guard when he sees Will rub self-consciously at his mouth, at the lipstick that refuses to budge.

He's still wearing the skin of his more feminine form, offered what he believes to be a more masculine role, and the dissonance he perceives has stalled him. Or, rather, his concern for *Hannibal's* perception of the dissonance has stalled him.

Hannibal leans down to nuzzle at Will's temple, smooths his fingers over the impressions of his teeth, hidden by Will's hair. "If your worry is for a dated and altogether inapplicable sense of my masculinity, darling, I have to tell you, that ship sank many years ago."

It pulls a startled sound from Will, widening eyes. He pushes Hannibal back gently, and at long last, meets him eye-to-eye. He turns his back on their reflections. "I can take off my makeup—"

"Why should you?" Hannibal replies, curious. "I know what I'm asking, and who I ask it from. How you express your gender has no bearing on the roles of our sexual relationship. We have no need to stick to what we've done in the past. We have our whole lives ahead of us, together."

Hannibal tilts his head; he brushes Will's hair back from his face, takes in the flutter of inked lashes when he so very gently brushes the pad of his thumb over Will's cheek, leans down to taste the wine on his painted mouth. Will moans at the press of a tongue between his teeth, and Hannibal growls softly as he laps at the points and dips of those tiny, savage things.

"And if you decide later you prefer things as they were, fine." Hannibal bares his teeth in return; grips at Will's hips and pulls him close, pushes his hair away from his throat, and lowers his mouth to it. He licks over the scar to feel Will shudder against his jaws, and purrs his pleasure when Will's fingers knot in his hair and tug. "But I want all of you, Will. I want to know how it feels to have you inside me. I want to watch you lose control of yourself."

Will pulls him up for a kiss, eyes wide and helpless, mouth relentless. For now, Will's body is smaller, but his strength is the stubborn kind. Still growing, still filling out. Hannibal wonders if someday Will would be able to hold him down and force him to stay. Provide Hannibal a challenge, an equal in the physical sense who can keep him on his toes, or on his back as the case may be. Oh, he hopes so.

Hannibal takes a step backward toward the bed; Will pursues him until he's the one pushing, until the backs of Hannibal's knees hit the mattress and he breaks away, until Will *shoves* and the abrupt sensation of falling overtakes him, and Hannibal's back hits the mattress with a bounce.

Hannibal looks up at the sublime creature above him, and he purrs, "I want you to show me why you love it so much when I come inside you."

Will's mouth parts on a shaken moan. He wiggles out of his pants and crawls onto the bed, and Hannibal pushes himself further up the mattress. He sprawls eagerly, chin tilted up to meet Will's searching mouth. He hovers over Hannibal, arms bracketed around his head; his hair falls around their faces, a dark, soft curtain of curls that Hannibal sinks his fingers into, just as Will dips his tongue between Hannibal's lips.

Will settles down atop him; his erection is barely restrained by a set of mesh panties to match the bralette, which—Hannibal purrs when he reaches back, skims his hands over the smooth warmth of

Will's ass, and finds that it's a thong. Will grins knowingly as he sits astride thick thighs and rocks forward against the swell of Hannibal's cock, drags his nails down Hannibal's chest in burning trails, and stops only to rub at his nipples. The sensation sparks sweetly within sensitive skin, and he exhales sharply when Will grinds and pinches, raptly focused with his cruelty. The muscles of his abdomen tense and flex, and quite against his better judgement, Hannibal arches idly in search of more touch, more of Will.

It's a strange thing to be the one laid on his back, but it's even more strange to force himself to wait for Will's whims. Will is not uncertain, expressly speaking, but he's certainly more hesitant than he would be if he were pursuing his pleasure within his own body, rather than within someone else's.

Hannibal smiles faintly; presses up on his elbows and Will rewards him with a kiss, more eager when shown active interest—and if that's what it takes, well. Hannibal will happily oblige him.

"You have no need to be cautious, mylimasis," Hannibal murmurs, and under Will's watchful eyes, slips his own hand beneath the waistband of his boxer-briefs. Will gets the idea immediately and lifts himself up so that Hannibal might wiggle out of them, bare himself to Will's rapt gaze. "You are intimately familiar with the limits of your body, as I am with mine. Do you believe me?"

Hannibal tilts his head back, bares his throat, and Will's eyes darken. He swallows tightly. Nods.

Hannibal, too, nods. Reaches up to skim his fingers over Will's soft belly, rubs at the swell of Will's trapped cock, if only to see his head tip back and his lashes flutter with pleasure, to see his teeth sink into his lower lip, still painted and perfect. "Then you know you cannot hurt me, since I will not allow myself to be hurt. Short of me stopping you, Will, you have no reason to restrain yourself. Have I ever hurt you?"

Will exhales hard. Rocks forward into the relentless, kneading push of Hannibal's palm, and shivers so hard it shakes the body below him. His flesh is hot to the touch, pink even beneath the red mesh. Hannibal can smell the first traces of leaking fluid, the scent of Will's arousal. Hannibal's mouth is wet to match.

"No," Will replies, and his chest heaves with breath—and then he strikes. He snags Hannibal by the wrist, and pins it up over his head. Leans down and snags the other, and holds Hannibal in place, growling when Hannibal tests the flex of his grip. There is none. Will's face is close, his breath hot, and he smiles. "Well," he adds. "Only when I wanted you to."

Hannibal flashes his teeth and jerks his chin toward the bedside table. Yes, there he is. "Perhaps you'll return the favor."

Will's pupils dilate. He holds both of Hannibal's wrists in one hand and paws blindly for the drawer; Hannibal, amused and aroused and content to be caged, allows him his show of dominance. Will has every capability of being vicious, and little of the strength necessary to exert himself upon someone of Hannibal's size.

The drawer drags open. "Do you want me to hurt you?" Will asks breathlessly. His pupils are fat with intrigue, dark with desire.

Hannibal rolls his head back and watches as Will hooks the simply pump-bottle with his index finger and drags it onto the bed. "Pain can add a certain sensual edge to pleasure under the right circumstances."

Will shoots him a wry but heated look. "You didn't answer my question."

Clever thing. Hannibal bits back a smile, and is quite sure he fails to hide it. Does he want Will to hurt him? Well—he can imagine a number of things he might enjoy with Will in the grand scheme of their lives together. Only, if it's to be formalized, it may benefit them to have more experience, and more time to talk beforehand. "Perhaps not this time."

Will's nails dig into his wrists, and yes, clever thing, indeed. He reads the implication loud and clear between Hannibal's words; it awakens something in him, empowers it to grow more forceful, more demanding, and when Hannibal lifts his hips, it snarls at the challenge. Hannibal's cock pulses against his abdomen. Seeing Will wild again after his period of recovery is a relief, as much as it is an untameable temptation.

Hannibal flexes, clenches. Will pumps lubricant into his hand; slicks his palm with it and snakes his hand beneath his panties. A few touches has him shivering, but also wincing at the scratch of the mesh trapping his wrist—

Hannibal arches a brow and curls his fingers, still pinned. "I'll stay exactly as you had me, if you'd like to take them off."

Will's eyes flash; he meets Hannibal's gaze and huffs, but obligingly unseats himself and flops onto his back in the attempt to drag his lingerie down over his thighs and calves, and drags the bralette up over his head. Will balls them up and tosses them somewhere into the room to be found later.

There's pink constriction marks around Will's ribs and around his hips; Hannibal wants to touch them, lick them, soothe them away until they're nothing, but he promised to stay still. So he waits, hisses quietly between his teeth with the force of his desire when Will wets his own cock in the channel of his fist, and for a moment loses himself in the touch. Hannibal's muscles tense reflexively; he fights the temptation to move and take as he wishes, to gorge himself on Will's sharp-edged affection and demand it for his own.

No. He waits, and watches Will with burning eyes and damnable obedience—and when Will turns his head to look at Hannibal, his painted-red lips curl into a knowing smirk.

"See something you want?" Will drawls.

There's no humor left to arch a brow or act aloof. Hannibal's mouth aches for the taste of Will's, and his body crackles with unused energy, stinging sharply in his limbs. "Always."

The points of Will's teeth are sharp and white within the cavern of his mouth. Hannibal's shoulder aches at the sight of them, watches the artful bunch and shift of Will's muscles beneath his skin as he reaches over, past Hannibal, to the pump-bottle of lube. The chemical scent is the mildest Hannibal could find, but still clings to his senses. Will's fingers shimmer in the golden light of the bedroom; wipes the excess on his abdomen and fumbles at a black elastic coiled around the base of the cap—a hair tie reserved for times such as these.

He grimaces at the stickiness of his hands, but sits up on his knees and turns his head over so that he can gather his curls and secure them high on his head. Once he does, the brand of Hannibal's teeth on his neck is raw and exposed, and Hannibal purrs at the sight of it.

Will crawls close, settles on his knees between Hannibal's legs and just… looks. He rests one hand on Hannibal's abdomen, lightly tracing the subtle dips of his abdominal muscles beneath skin. He traces the line of hair from Hannibal's naval to his cock, and Hannibal allows himself a quiet moan when Will jacks him from base to head, a slow pull that has hooks of pleasure pulling sharply within his guts.

His mouth is dry. Hannibal licks his lips, and when he speaks, his voice rasps. “Am I free to move my hands now?”

At that, Will looks awfully amused. The tops of his thighs meet the backs of Hannibal’s, and he walks himself forward on his hands until they are pressed together entirely. Murmurs against Hannibal’s mouth, “You didn’t say *‘Mother, may I?’*” Will licks at his lower lip, and pulls away before Hannibal can surge up for a kiss. “Yes, Hannibal, you can move.”

Challenging thing. Hannibal stretches until his bones idly *pop*, and when he reaches for Will, it’s to brush one hand over his hip. The red compression marks from his panties have started to fade.

Will sighs, and in a moment of tenderness, lies his palm over Hannibal’s hand and manually curls it around the crest of his pelvis, like Hannibal hold Will’s bones in his hands if he wanted to. “How do you want to do this? Fingers, or—”

“It’s been quite some time, but I’ve done this before,” Hannibal replies, and he smiles when Will’s eyes darken with that ever-present tinge of possessiveness. His own grip, too, tightens. “Use plenty of lubricant, and go slowly.”

Will pumps more into his palm; shivers as he slicks his cock, but his gaze is nothing but heated when he glances downward and, with only a flicker of hesitation, smooths the wet pads of his fingers over Hannibal’s entrance.

Hannibal remembers how it’s meant to feel. But the memory versus the reality of Will’s touch are so stunningly different. Tender-but-demanding fingers brush against sensitive skin; his gaze settles raptly on Hannibal’s face. Will budges up on his knees, and Hannibal spreads his thighs wide, makes room for his sweet thing between them. He mindfully relaxes; the thought of holding Will’s flesh inside him, encouraging that instinct of animals to fight and fuck is one that thrills him. There’s a great deal of pleasure to be found on the receiving end of sex, and if he has faith in one thing, it’s Will’s desperate desire to please him.

And he *does* want to please—it’s clear to see in Will’s darkened eyes, his wet mouth. There’s a hot pink flush spreading down his chest, staining his cheeks, filling his erection until it’s ruddy red, dripping clear lube and the hazier fluid of precome. Will’s knuckles are white; his grip aches on Hannibal’s hips, but his hands shake, and under Hannibal’s watchful gaze, Will starts to push in—

“Oh,” Will gasps. It’s barely a breath, and is followed by a sharp exhale.

The lubricant makes it easier, but Hannibal’s unpracticed muscles still protest. It’s been years since his last encounter like this, and so this feels like a new beginning, a new place being carved into his body by the blunt head of Will’s cock. But true to his word, Will goes slowly, so slowly. Hannibal knows him intimately, knows what to expect: a similar length to his own, perhaps more slender. Circumcised; he sighs at the feel of every ridge, every vein. Hannibal wonders if this is what it felt like for Will, too, the first time they did this. The heat of him is so warm, almost burning—

“Fuck,” Will whispers. He clutches convulsively at Hannibal’s waist; he folds inward on himself until his forehead touches Hannibal’s sternum, nearly bent in half. He’s absolutely still, not pushing forward or pulling out. “Fuck, are you—? Okay, are you, is this—?”

“I’m alright, Will,” Hannibal replies softly. He skims his fingers over whatever of Will he can reach and hopes it feels reassuring. His body is spread wide, protesting at the in-between of neither being full nor empty. Now that they’ve begun, all he wants is to *push.* “How do you feel?”

"You feel," Will retorts, all breath, bitten-off. And then he moans, some sweet, broken thing, and Hannibal's gut clenches with want—and Will's cries are redoubled at the flutter of his muscles. "You are *really* tight, and hot, and. Oh my *God."* Will rubs his cheek helplessly against the dip of Hannibal's sternum. His fingers rake welted furrows into flesh with his scarlet claws, brighter than blood. "Is this what it's supposed to be like, because—hnnngh, *Hannibal*—waitwaitwait, oh—*fuck."*

Well, never let it be said that Hannibal is a patient man when it comes to self indulgence.

Hannibal tips his head back against the mattress and allows the bone-deep moan to escape between his teeth now that Will is fully sheathed. It's much better this way, to have Will's body pressed tightly to his, all the way inside so that they may both adjust entirely, not only in half-measures. He is full, split open, forced wide for Will and Will alone.

He wonders what it must look like, how stretched and red his muscles must be, clutched around the base of Will's cock. It's something not even the mirror over the bed can show him, despite the glorious image of Will braced above him, the sheen of sweat on the planes of his back. The dark, curling baby hairs at his nape. The flex of his glutes and the subtle dimples above his ass.

And Will—well, each inhale is almost a gasp, each exhale a keening whine that is pressed directly against Hannibal's sternum, and Hannibal feels each bitten-off sound in the ventricles of his heart. Will's hands weaken, flutter, rub in broad, flat expanses across his ribs and chest and stomach. Undeniably tender. Undeniably overwhelmed.

Hannibal reaches for him, cups the nape of his neck, and deliberately holds still. It's a small mercy, he knows, when subjected to the heat of another's body for the first time, and the desire to drive his cock in deep enough to breed. The oldest instinct of their kind, no matter the irrelevancies of biology. "I have you, darling," he murmurs. "It's okay. Take your time."

"I want. Mm." Will shivers and presses back into Hannibal's hand; lifts his head and meets his eyes, licks his lips. There's a certain weak helplessness in the expression he wears, but Hannibal can only find it flattering, amusing, fondly sympathetic as Will's gaze lingers on his mouth like he's starving for it. Hannibal hums his pleasure and carefully pushes up on his elbows; Will wastes no time at all licking between his lips, tracing his teeth, sucking at Hannibal's tongue. The angle is suboptimal, but the feeling of it is divine.

"Okay," Will whispers. "Are you okay? Can I move?"

"I'm very okay," Hannibal replies. Resists the urge to clench around Will's shaft and *move,* despite the dull sparks in his lower spine that are begging to catch fire. He needs his hands to keep himself upright, so he rubs his cheek against Will's. In the scant space between them, he catches Will's eyes with lowered lashes, bares his throat, and can only imagine how he looks when he murmurs, "Please."

Will exhales unsteadily. Nods.

The first pull back is mostly friction, mostly Will's arms shaking as he holds himself over Hannibal, mostly relaxation and sparks of sensation until the inevitable push back inward. Will demands and Hannibal yields, and when he hitches his hips up just a little more, tightens his thighs around Will's—

Oh, yes. Yes, that's it.

He doesn't realize he's said it aloud until Will's mouth drops open, sweetly swollen, and he nods. His next thrust is more purposeful, but smoother, too; Will finds a rhythm just as Hannibal's hands find

his hair and one slips beneath the elastic, one over his exposed back, and lays his claim with nails and teeth.

And once Will has that approval (that's perhaps not so silent as it is quiet growls and breathy sounds ripped from Hannibal's lungs), he's no longer cautious. He does as he should, does as Hannibal wants.

He *takes.*

And perhaps the many times they've done this the other way around have taught Will what he likes, because he replicates with startling, blissful ease. Will is relentless, slow, but momentous, a work of art in movement as Hannibal watches their reflections in the mirror. Will's hips sting against Hannibal's thighs as he sinks in deep, slick with sweat. He only stutters and gasps when Hannibal clenches around him, shoves himself onto Will's cock in search of—

Hannibal moans quietly at the first brush of Will's shaft past his prostate, flattens his hands on Will's spine and slides them down. They settle at Will's waist, and he tugs. Guides, and at once he is reminded so strongly of standing in Will's barn in the cold in the aftermath of their hunt, a different kind of wetness, a different kind of redness. If he has the chance, he'll teach Will everything. Everything. "Mm, right there, love."

Will nods; looks at Hannibal from beneath the escaped tendrils of his bangs, stuck to his face with a fine sheen of sweat. His eyes nearly black, lined in black; his cheeks so much more pink than Will has ever painted them, and that flush stains his neck, his chest. The muscles in his arms and back shift as Will adjusts, as he pushes in, parts Hannibal's body for himself, lays claim to everything Hannibal has to give. Above their heads, Hannibal watches in high definition.

Will shakes. He bares his teeth, a feral thing, takes gasping breaths through his mouth that shift to moans as Hannibal moves with him, plants his feet on the bed behind Will to push *up,* even as he pulls Will down. It forces the head of his cock against that tender little place that aches inside of him, a pleasure so deep he can feel it in his lower back, in his legs, dripping from his dick and puddling on his abdomen. Hannibal pulls his hand from Will's hair, snakes it between their bodies—

"No." Will snags his wrist, snaps his teeth. Pushes Hannibal's hand away, and though his muscles twitch and tremble from holding himself up on one arm, Will reaches for Hannibal's shaft instead. He glowers even as he grits his teeth, and Hannibal watches with breathless wonder. Shivers when Will fucks in slowly and fists Hannibal's cock in time, a rolling push-pull like the ocean tide. And, oh, it builds.

Hannibal's fingers clench, muscles tighten. His lips twitch toward a snarl, his nails grip and shred like claws, like hooks, painting unsteady lines like a Van Gogh across Will's canvas of flesh, so fascinating to watch as they bloom in shades of pink and red. Such an odd, enthralling thing to allow himself to be complacent beneath the growing shadow of this this glorious monster, and to leave his own marks in turn. Growing larger and stronger and hungrier every day, his Will, in more ways than one.

And here he lies, on this sacrificial altar to everything Will is—a creature chained, but never tamed.

Will huffs and whines; his body smells saccharine with pleasure, sharp with arousal, and his slow, forceful piston in and out of Hannibal's body squelches and drips. He's holding on only with sheer stubbornness; drops his mouth to Hannibal's chest, worries the skin with sucking kisses and sharp teeth, laps the sweat from Hannibal's skin. His fist around Hannibal's cock makes the sort of wet, primal sounds that are unique to two things fucking, and they drag sensation from his cells like a nicotine high, vibrate in Hannibal's spine as Will rubs beneath the glans with the pad of his thumb.

“Come on,” Will whispers like a curse; drags his tongue over a nipple and catches it between his teeth, and Hannibal’s breath catches and clogs his throat when Will glances up. Blue-back eyes glitter with raw desire, unhinged want. “Come on. You gonna come for me?” Oh, his voice is rough, nearly ruined, but so sweet when Will purrs, “I want you to, Hannibal. Lock down so tight I could never get out of you. I wanna see your face when I do to you what you do to me.”

Just the thought of it—Hannibal exhales sharply, writhes, the pressure in his gut and his cock building, almost unbearable. He tears at Will’s sides, his jaws part on a moan, baring his teeth to any God who dares to watch over them in moments like these.

Will’s arm gives out, the full force of his weight bearing Hannibal down as he snaps and swears and snarls, mouth at Hannibal’s throat. His voice drops, a rumble straight from his chest, slipped between teeth and tongue. His weakened arm slips beneath Hannibal’s head, angles him up just enough that Will can edge his canines against Hannibal’s jugular at the same time he tightens his fingers on Hannibal’s cock and fucks deep. “Come on, baby.”

The wave crests. In the mirror, their bodies tense and flex until they are made of stone, a moment of primal pleasure captured in sculpture. Hannibal’s hand fists in Will’s hair, *pulls,* and Will barks out something that’s not quite a laugh, not quite a moan; *howls* as Hannibal’s body locks up around him, tight and unforgiving. Hannibal’s muscles are stronger, his body bigger, but when he leans up to drag Will into a kiss, Will curls in around him just the same. The elastic loosens and falls from his hair; his curls tumble free around their faces. It sticks to their overheated skin as Hannibal comes between their bellies, as milky slick puddles and drips over the side of his waist, just as Will’s pools hot and wet inside him, makes him soaked and sloppy. Disgustingly arousing, satisfying in the way only illicit things can be.

Will licks at his teeth, moans into Hannibal’s mouth. Touches his chest, his belly, his thighs. Nuzzles at his cheeks, even when Hannibal turns to catch Will’s lip between his jagged fangs and tug him back.

His heart pounds against his ribs. His muscles ache. Hannibal straightens his legs, collapses back against the cradle of Will’s arm beneath his neck, huffs and clenches when Will pulls out, when he curses beneath his breath and all but dives for the tissues in the bedside table in a fruitless attempt to save the sheets, despite the fact that he can barely hold himself up.

Will is perfect, Will is astounding, Will is earth-shattering, Will is—

—settling back down, curling onto his side, and Hannibal rolls toward him. He rests his head on Will’s outstretched arm, forehead tucked against his flushed chest. Will cradles him and Hannibal loops an arm over his waist; Will slips one leg up and over Hannibal’s hips and drags him closer, and Hannibal closes his eyes.

Will runs his fingers through his hair; long, slow drags against his scalp, and nuzzles the top of his head. Murmurs all sorts of nonsensical things, but mostly Hannibal just listens to the slowing, calming rhythm of Will’s heart. Until—

“You *do* have all of me,” Will says softly. “Even before this. You always have.”

Hannibal opens his eyes. He doesn’t lift his head. “Perhaps,” he allows, and hopes it sounds gentle; Will is lying to him, and Hannibal knows it. It doesn’t make their love any less real, but it certainly gets in the way of true and complete understanding of one another. “But there are parts of you I will never have until you’ve lived through them. Neither of us will ever fully know the other until we’ve loved them from our first day to our last day.”

Will's arms tighten around him. The blunt edges of his nails skim down the nape of Hannibal's neck, drift down his spine. Down and back, over and over. "I want to know all of you," he murmurs back. "If that's what it takes, then it's everything I've ever wanted."

A tender heart beats against his cheek. It skips at its owner's confession, speeds and flutters like the wings of a bird inside a cage. His eagle, ready to take flight, and promising to meet a shadowed stranger in the sky.

Will takes a deep breath, swallows hard. There's a sweet, dull edge of pain where his nails grip and hold Hannibal close.

Is he ready? Is he, truly?

There's only one way to know. "Will, I—"

"Hannibal." Hannibal stops. Will takes a breath, and pulls back just enough that they can lock eyes. That Hannibal can see him as Will licks his lips, looks conflicted, and visibly makes the conscious decision to speak anyway. "I've never asked you for anything."

Hannibal holds very, very still. "Yes, I know."

"If I asked you for something, would you give it to me?"

Hannibal's pulse speeds to match Will's, but still, he doesn't move. "Without question."

Will nods, almost to himself. And then he rolls onto his back. He drags Hannibal with him, until Will is pinned beneath his weight. Hannibal readjusts, holds himself up so he can see Will's face. So that when he hovers over his beloved and looks down into his eyes, there is nowhere for Will to hide.

But he doesn't hide. Will's expression is undeniably raw.

"The semester's done," Will says, and Hannibal blinks. Frowns—this is not what he expected. "And I know there's nothing we can do until the holiday's over, but. What we talked about earlier…"

Will inhales. Closes his eyes. Exhales. Opens them.

"Let's run away together," he murmurs, and for a moment, Hannibal stops breathing. Will reaches up to touch his chest, just fingertips. So gentle. So trusting. "Paris, Athens, Florence, I don't care where. I want to see everything you want to show me, and I have so many things to tell you. Things that… I don't know how to say yet."

Hannibal stares at him in silence. Assesses the moment, until he knows what it means.

Will is choosing *him.* Not a shadow in the darkness whispering sweet promises, but the man who lies beside him at night and says them to Will's face. And Hannibal has stumbled upon this new event horizon so suddenly that he is reeling on the edge of a hundred-foot drop down into their *after,* the next great step of their lives.

An opportunity for them to leave these walls of their home, to air the truth in a place where it will not pollute the still waters of their comfortable life. The rare gift of a second chance—a chance for honesty and understanding, for both of them.

Hannibal braces himself on his forearms. Ducks his head, and touches his lips to Will's in a lingering kiss. Once, twice, thrice. Rumbles his contentment when Will brushes his fingers across Hannibal's

cheek. And though there's not yet honesty in his words, it's there in his eyes: open, hopeful. Pleading.

So Hannibal answers him in the only way he can. "We're family, darling. There's nothing you could tell me that would change the way I love you. And if you want to go away, we will."

But Hannibal wants more than that. He wants *everything.*

"We'll go to Florence. I have confessions of my own to make. And when we've both said everything we need to say, if you love me then as you do right now…"

He falls silent. No, there is no better moment than this, right here and now. He has no token to offer, but it doesn't matter. He inhales, decided, takes a breath, and Will stares back, and his eyes widen, his lips part with an expression that is almost pained, and he whispers, "Hannibal—"

"Marry me," Hannibal says softly. "In *la Cappella Palatina.* It's the only place in the world that holds my heart the way you do. I can think of no better place to bind our lives together as one."

He doesn't ask. Tonight, he's certain of the answer. Later, less certain. Hannibal can only hope it'll be the same when Will knows everything, for he has no idea what to expect from himself if Will denies him. No idea what he'll do if Will turns him away.

He doesn't want to know. Never wants to know.

"Hannibal." Will stops himself. His eyes shine, glimmer, and his lashes, too—

—with tears. The scent of salt clings to Will's body, and Hannibal's muscles tighten with shock; why is he crying? Why is he—

Will's body lurches with a watery laugh. Surges up, arms around Hannibal's neck, and presses his face into the bare, chilled expanse of his shoulder. Pulls Hannibal down atop him, and kicks his legs up around his waist. Holds him tight enough to bruise with everything he is, until they are one creature in the mirror with four arms, four legs, two heads, one heart.

"Yes," Will whispers, and the heart beats for both of them. "Of course. Yes."

After they shower and change the sheets, Will lies beside him on his belly in the dark and watches over Hannibal's shoulder as he purchases tickets for three days hence. He exhales unsteadily at the price, makes a token sound of protest when Hannibal selects First Class—but with an amused, sidelong glance, Will goes quiet.

"I'll admit, this is a bit of a surprise," Hannibal murmurs. "I had every intention of buying a ring prior to your accident, and then I had thought to do it after the holiday, but you seem to have inspired me to jump the gun."

Will grins. Leans into Hannibal's side and bats his mascara-free lashes teasingly. "I have that effect on people."

Hannibal blinks. Does he mean—?

“I think we should buy the return tickets once we get there,” Will adds, and turns his attention back to the tablet. “Just in case we decide to, like, rent a car and drive somewhere else and end up halfway across Europe, road-tour style.”

An interesting thought. Hannibal regards him warmly. “Well, if we decide to pack lightly, we could always rent motorcycles.”

Will blinks. Swallows. “Motorcycles?” Blinks again, and his cheeks flush pink. Oh, interesting. “Isn’t it winter?”

“Their winters are much more mild than ours,” Hannibal replies, and when Will licks his lips, he starts to smile. “It could be fun.”

Will huffs through his nose, rests his temple against Hannibal’s bicep, and looks down at the tablet as he books an extended stay suite. “I’ve never ridden one before.”

“We could rent *one,”* he offers. “You could ride with me.”

At that, Will’s smile grows; his eyes squint with amusement, pleasure. “Now there’s a thought.”

Hannibal huffs a laugh in return. In his chest, there is something huge and ever-expanding, and he knows it’s happiness. He knows it’s love. “You think about it, darling. Let me know.”

Will balances his chin on Hannibal’s shoulder. For a while, he just… looks.

Hannibal presses *lock;* the screen goes black and plunges them into the night. “What?”

The corners of Will’s lips pull upward in something nearly too sentimental to be categorized as a smile. He wears his heart in his eyes, an open window to his soul that Hannibal can see even without light. He tips his face up, touches his lips to Hannibal’s in a chaste, lingering kiss. Presses their foreheads together. Cups his cheek. “I love you. So much.”

For a time, Hannibal cannot speak past the lump of his pulse pounding in his throat. He can only hope, only… *pray* that Will feels his devotion in turn. That he won’t abandon everything they’ve built once he looks into the abyss and sees the bodies beneath the bridge.

Choose me, Will, he does not whisper. *Always, above everything and everyone else, choose me.*

“And I love you,” Hannibal replies. Will’s lashes droop and his smile widens, and he accepts Hannibal’s nuzzle graciously as he finally collapses onto his side, drags a pillow nearer, and starts to settle in—

A buzz. Another, syncopated. Will’s brows draw together and he rolls over, opens the drawer to the bedside table, and a burst of light illuminates his face. He squints at the phone, reads the messages. Before Hannibal can read them (he’s not above it, when given the opportunity to indulge nosy curiosity) Will locks the device and tosses it back without bothering to send a reply, and pushes the drawer closed.

Will turns his back on it and pulls the blanket up over his shoulders. “Just Margot,” he mutters, and wiggles to get comfortable. “She can wait.”

Hannibal huffs an amused breath; frowns, slightly, but decides not to pay it mind. Will is undeniably tired, just as Hannibal is truly exhausted. After the long night yesterday and the long day today (and the longer, yet delightful evening) he is well past the point of needing a solid night’s sleep. They have

no immediate plans, and no need for socialization with the holiday at hand, no need to leave the house for additional food considering their surplus of leftovers. There is only time to be spent together, and finally, peace and quiet.

Hannibal pulls the blankets up and lies on his side, facing Will. He looks already half asleep, lashes drooping; he flickers a small smile at Hannibal as they both begin to drift.

“Night, baby,” Will whispers, barely breath.

Hannibal drops toward unconsciousness like a stone through still water. “Goodnight, mylimasis,” he murmurs back, and drifts into such restful sleep he doesn’t dream at all.

He awakens to sunlight, all at once.

Hannibal blinks as his eyes adjust; the morning light is full and bright through the windows, certainly later than he usually sleeps, or cares to sleep. The bed beside him is empty, unmade, but Will’s phone lays facedown atop the bedside table, attached to its charger. Hannibal frowns at it for a moment. Didn’t Will put…

He rolls over and touches the home button on his tablet—nearly ten in the morning. For Hannibal, that’s nearly unheard of. He glances at the notifications on the news feed—

>> SMS Alert: New Post on **Abnormal Analysis**

Hannibal’s heart stops beating. He doesn’t breathe. Doesn’t *understand.* And for a moment, that raw confusion grips him until he reaches to unplug the charger, unlock—

A sound: the doorbell.

Hannibal’s subconscious memory kicks into high gear, adrenaline shoving him into the land of the living. He knows with immediacy that the doorbell was what woke him up.

He gets out of bed. Pulls on a pair of lounge pants and his heavy robe, and leaves his tablet behind. As he descends the stairs, he notes the sound of silence. “Will?”

No answer.

Hannibal’s hand closes into a fist.

As he reaches the foyer, he keys off the alarm, and catches sight of the gloves waiting by the door. Oh—perhaps it’s Eloise. In truth, he cannot remember whether or not she said she was traveling to be with her daughter this year, or whether her daughter was coming to them. He hadn’t been paying much attention at the time.

No matter. He’ll give them to her, since she’ll surely be in a hurry, and figure out exactly what is going on—

Hannibal opens the door.

It's not Eloise.

"Jack," he says, surprised; Hannibal's eyes narrow in the bright morning light. A beautiful day, by all accounts, if it were not for Jack Crawford on his doorstep first thing in the morning. "Did you forget something?"

Jack's expression is grim. "No, I'm afraid not."

A million things align in his brain at once. It stings him, stuns him.

Jack is here. Will is gone. Will posted an article, and the FBI is waiting on his doorstep.

Something low and cold starts to form in his stomach, ices over and hardens like diamond. An animal awakens in the back of Hannibal's mind, blind and furious and heartbroken and ready to fight.

He *is* ready for it. In truth, right now, the catharsis of killing will be his only relief from the reality that is forming in front of him. How could this have happened? When did it happen? *Did* it happen?

He chokes back a snarl, and only barely manages civility. "What can I do for you?"

Crawford's lips press together. "I'm really sorry to do this, Hannibal. But I'm going to have to ask you to come with me."

Hannibal blinks slowly. The rabid thing inside his skin is wild, but he measures his breathing. Slowly reaches over to place the gloves on the entry table, and considers how fast he might break the glass bowl resting there and cut Jack's throat before he gets shot. Maybe. Maybe not.

And then he will hunt down—

"It's about Will," Jack says, and Hannibal stops.

Turns his eyes to Jack. His hand waits in midair. "What *about* Will?"

To his credit, Jack does not lower his eyes. But his voice is tentative, hesitant. Reluctant. But clearly when he makes the decision, he decides to say it all at once. "He's been arrested as an accessory to the murder of Annalise Gideon, Mason Verger, and five others, and for aiding and abetting the maneuverings of the Chesapeake Ripper."

Hannibal stares at him. He waits for the joke. It doesn't come, and the pit inside him deepens in complexity. Darkens. Expands, until its howl fills his skull. "What are you talking about?"

"Have you seen Will this morning?" Jack asks with a raised brow.

"I've just woken up. We had a late evening." Hannibal's mind races (to Mason Verger, Annalise Gideon, *five others),* zings from one place to another. Jack is not behaving as one would behave if he were to suspect *Hannibal* as the other half of this equation.

Perhaps he doesn't suspect him at all. Perhaps Will hasn't betrayed him. Perhaps it's possible. He desperately, terribly needs it to be possible.

"Evidently," Crawford says, "not quite late enough." Hannibal sparks with anger; oblivious, Jack exhales heavily through his nose. "I'm really sorry, Hannibal. This is not what I wanted to bring to your door on Christmas Eve, but you are the *only* one who might be able to get Will to talk to us. Maybe this is a misunderstanding."

“It must be,” Hannibal snaps automatically, for defending Will is still—

It must be.

Crawford says nothing. But the expression on his face is easily readable, and all the more apologetic for it. *No, I don’t think it is.*

There must be some explanation. There must be *something*—

The article.

“Jack, I’m afraid I’m going to have to make a call to my lawyer on Will’s behalf.” He cannot breathe. He can barely speak. He needs to get away somehow, he needs to see what Will has written so perhaps there is some chance to settle this upheaval inside him without bloodshed, *something.* “You understand.”

“James Deioss?” Jack asks grimly. “He’s already there. Will called him.” Is silent for a moment. “Will had his card.”

Hannibal stands still. Stunned. Gutted, and for an entirely different reason. “I…”

One part pride, but only in the most distant sense. The killer inside him applauds Will’s good sense. But the part of his monster that knows Will as his beloved, it howls, paces, whines, *why didn’t he call me? Did he think I wouldn’t help him?*

Jack grimaces like he can read the betrayal on his face, and his shoulders roll inward. Hannibal wonders if he’s ever had to deliver terrible news to a friend. He doesn’t seem the kind of man to be squeamish, but he has the inevitable look of someone who is carrying guilt on his back like Atlas and the globe. “Perhaps you’d like to get dressed and come with me,” he suggests softly.

Hannibal steps back. Gestures brusquely. Jack steps in.

He closes the door with a smart *click.*

Fire blazes inside his eyes, even while a frozen waste is clutched around his heart, his spine, his ribs. But Hannibal’s voice is entirely even when he says, “Give me five minutes. I’ll be right back.”

“I’m…” Jack starts, and Hannibal stops. “I’m afraid I have to follow you up, Hannibal. It’s nothing personal.”

“Why?” he asks softly, a snake coiling to strike. “Am I suspected of something?”

Jack blinks. “What? No, definitely not. It’s just procedure, is all, for your safety. We know who we’re looking for. It’s just a matter of *finding* him.”

Hannibal stares at him. “You know the identity of the Chesapeake Ripper?”

“I shouldn’t say anything, officially. But I consider you a friend, Hannibal. I’m sure you’ll know soon enough. So, off the record?” Jack asks seriously, solemnly, and Hannibal nods. What else can he do? There is no other path. This is information that is critical, and he has to know it. But then Jack averts his eyes. Says quietly, and *openly* apologetic, “Given the nature of everything that’s happened, it is… my *personal* belief that… they may have been having an affair.”

Rage boils in Hannibal's blood. No, that cannot be. Will would never. Will *could* never, he would have *known*—

"Abel Gideon is the Chesapeake Ripper," Jack says, and Hannibal sees red.

Chapter End Notes

Will's Alexander McQueen Blazer & Dinner Party Ensemble

3:19

Chapter Notes

So sorry for the delay. Family and travel got the best of me. It certainly shouldn't be this long again.

Be aware that this chapter is a dark one. Proceed with care.

In reality, the evening went something like this:

Will donned his armor, his disguise, and descended into chaos. He caught each cold, flat glance that Hannibal leveled at Abel Gideon, but acknowledged none of them; ignorance is the best angle to play, and Hannibal can hold whatever concerns he'd like within the halls of his mind. Will has too much at stake tonight to pay much mind to petty jealousies. Sooner than later, Hannibal will see exactly the lengths to which Will would go to defend their love.

Instead, he fleetingly met Jack's eyes in quiet moments of conversation in the kitchen, not enough attention to seem anything other than polite—oh, but Jack noticed the way Abel stood just a little too close, too chummy, too familiar. Abel, of course, perceived each indulgent smile from Will as a quiet acknowledgement. *Us vs. them.*

Everyone in the room believed Will was on their side. In truth, he's on no side but his own.

And then came Kade Prurnell, head of the BAU. She was… unexpected. Her eyes weighed heavily on Will, on Jack, and though they tried to obscure the nature of their acquaintance—

"So, Willa," she'd said, *"I heard through the grapevine that Agent Crawford helped you with some nasty business with a fellow co-ed."*

"Yes, ma'am," Will replied, as proper as his Southern raising. *"I was lucky to know him."*

"I understand you underwent an investigation based on those accusations."

Will's smile had frozen on his face. *"Yes, ma'am."*

"And you were later cleared of all suspicion. Though in my perusal of the paperwork, it was… difficult to ascertain what investigation actually took place."

Will had tilted his head. Smiled mildly, brows drawn together in good-natured confusion. *"I wouldn't know, I'm not FBI."*

"No," Kade said. *"No, you're not. Please understand, if anything comes up in these… other investigations that points to anyone's involvement or intrusion that does not have proper clearance,*

due process will be taken."

Will had bitten back a laugh. Widened his eyes earnestly, perplexed. *"Of course. That's the law. I... excuse me, Agent Prurnell, I thought everything was settled with Freddie's accusations, but I'd be happy to answer any further questions if you have them."* He paused. *"The restroom's just here."*

Kade's eyes had been suspicious, but the weight of Margot's words and the traps she laid about Mason and Molson's transgressions still clearly lingered on her conscience. She paused at the threshold of the washroom and nodded, just once. *"Hopefully that won't be necessary. Thank you, Willa."*

And from there, well. It became clear that Will's time to maneuver would be limited from here on out, and he had to take advantage of every second.

He ducked outside through the front door in a quiet moment when everyone was cleared from the entryway, bare feet slipped into his work boots, the key fob to Margot's Lexus tucked in his pocket, and another tucked into his gloved palm—

It took only seconds to free the license plates from the spare tire compartment of Margot's coupe and slip then into Abel Gideon's, to lock everything back up and go back to the porch, taking a few steps up when the front door opened to—

Eloise Komeda, a cigarette held primly between her fingers with the ease of one who has held one there for a great many years. Her eyes softened when she saw Will, shrewd but kind woman that she is. She exhaled through her nose, and it came out as a huff of amused steam. She lit the cigarette. *"You look like you could use one of these."*

"It might've been a better reason to get some air," Will acknowledged, and she'd laughed.

And oh, to the very end, the surprises kept coming. Abel was… twitchy, in a word. Hiding something, clearly. But with their multitudes of guests, Will got no time to ask the reason, only to reach out and rest his hand on Abel's arm during their departure. Told him, *take it easy* and *have a great night* and *really, no harm, Dr. Gideon, thank you so much for coming, hope to see you again soon.* Hannibal's shadow cast from the kitchen doorway into the foyer until it overlapped with Will's, and though he never spoke a word, and never drew close enough to touch, Will could feel the grip of his possession until the second he closed the door behind Margot and Alana.

Until he handed over that possession to Will.

And Will took it. Takes it. Takes *him.*

In the aftermath, in the quiet, the terror comes. The many *what if*s. And for a moment, Will allows himself to believe that he'll actually run away from it all. That they can leave, and when they get to Europe, maybe Will would suggest they don't come back, and Hannibal would say yes, because he always says yes to whatever Will asks.

For a moment, Will allows himself to believe they'll go together, and not that he's laying the final piece of his contingency plan in a one-way, one-man escape.

One that's not for him.

And by the end of the night, when Hannibal hovers over him and stares down at him and says *marry me* like he cannot even bear to make it a question, like he can't even allow the possibility of Will

saying no, Will's eyes well with tears and holds Hannibal close and says *yes,* because he's never wanted anything more in his life, and he's never been so terrified of losing it.

>> It's done.

>> I need your help. Something happened.

Will's heart catches in his throat. His back is to Hannibal, his body pleasantly sore, and until this moment, he was the happiest he's ever been—

Until this. Until now.

No. No, no, no. Abel was supposed to give him twenty four hours' notice. There was supposed to be a chain of events put into motion, not a random fucking text at midnight telling Will he's killed his wife and something is *wrong.*

Fuck.

Will locks the burner phone and all but throws it back into the drawer. Pushes it closed. His jaw is tight and tense as he rolls over, pulls the blanket up over himself to give his hands something to squeeze. Hannibal's eyes on him are dark, curious, affectionate—and Will has to keep his cool.

He has to.

"Just Margot," he murmurs, and settles in to—"She can wait."

Hannibal nods, some barely-recognizable thing, and reaches for the blankets; faces Will, and in this dark warmth, his eyelids droop. Even now, his muscles tremble with exhaustion, though Hannibal shows no sign of it on his face. It's clearly involuntary. Will has thoroughly worn him out. It's exactly as he'd hoped to do.

He'd meant to help Hannibal sleep. Now, of course, having Hannibal fall into deep, unrepentant rest is more crucial than ever. A happy accident, that.

Will's lashes dip, half lidded. As one can lure a dog toward rest with sympathetic expressions, he leads Hannibal toward his ultimate end for the evening. And, yes, Hannibal's eyes grow heavy. The tense lines of his shoulders begin to relax…

"Night, baby," Will murmurs, and it hurts the whole way from his lungs to past his teeth.

A smile pulls at Hannibal's mouth, barely a twitch, and his eyes fall closed. "Goodnight, mylimasis," he slurs softly, and within mere still moments, his breath goes shallow and his muscles release, his cheek pressed heavily to the pillow. Will aches to touch him. Longs for it. Stares at Hannibal so thoroughly that he's sure the photo negative of his sleeping face is seared behind his eyelids, never to be forgotten.

If Hannibal's instincts are so deeply buried that he's not roused from the heaviness of Will's gaze, then…

Will gets out of bed. Silently extracts his burner phone from the drawer, and leaves his main one behind. It will stay here tonight, an alibi of location. If Will makes it back tonight, GPS and Hannibal's security system will show he never left.

He pauses at the end of the bed, and looks back. He doesn't want to think this is the last time he'll see this room. Immune to the whirring of his mind and the whirling of his emotions, Hannibal does not so much as stir, and with his heart in his throat, Will turns and tiptoes out and closes the door silently behind him.

He stands there in the hall for a moment, naked as the day he was born, flayed as raw as if the Ripper had done it himself. Every inch of him hurts, pulses, aches.

And every cell of him is furious.

How *dare* Abel Gideon ruin this for him? How *dare* he? After everything Will has done, after everything they talked about, his promises that he understood the importance of this going *flawlessly,* and that Will would *not* take the fall to save his ass if he messed up—

Will wishes he could say he was surprised. He's not.

Will creeps down the staircase in the nude; he knew it might come to this, a silent retreat where even the sounds of Will dressing could alert Hannibal to what was happening, and the backpack he stashed in Hannibal's entry closet holds all the things he needs. Cotton underwear, and black, form-fitting clothing—the same sort of thing he wore to the Verger Estate that night, and a change for after.

But first, he has other things to attend to.

Will dresses in the study in the dark, hair pulled back tight and out of the way. He leans over Hannibal's desk to scrawl on a piece of paper—then rips it off and shoves it into his pocket. No goodbye notes. He refuses to let himself think that way.

Will swings the backpack up onto his shoulders, and crosses into the kitchen. Lifts the pantry trap door. Closes it behind him.

Descends.

The basement is black as the pit, an oppressive darkness that Will navigates solely on the light emitted from his burner phone. He knows where he's going, and wants to leave as little sign as possible. Everything he needs is in Margot's car.

Except…

He stops at the back of the room, the hallway leading to the confined, concealed set of stairs. The light catches, flashes back at him, and Will looks up.

He takes down one of Hannibal's plastic suits. Folds it, rolls it, and puts it in the bag. Stands, and takes a step—

But he's not doing this alone, is he? Not all of it.

He turns back and takes a second. With any luck, both will be returned before Hannibal ever has to know that they're gone, and given the uncertainties of what tonight may hold…

Will lifts the bag onto his shoulder. Tightens the straps. Takes a breath.

Will ascends on the other side, slips out the hidden door, and secures it.

>> Stay where you are. I'm coming to you.

He gets into Margot's coupe as quietly as he can manage, and thanks any and every God that Margot preferred the purr of a fine-tuned engine to the yowling of a muscle car.

When he's on the road, he calls her. She answers immediately.

"You told me you'd only call from this number when it was time." She doesn't greet him; she knows who it is. They talked about this. Went over this.

This was not the plan.

"Something got fucked up," Will spits. "I'm on my way to find out *how* fucked. I need you to be ready just in case."

"Jesus." There's movement on the other line. It sounds like she's pacing. *"That's not encouraging, Will. You said—"*

"I know what I said!" he snaps. Presses the gas pedal to the floor in order to ignore the shaking in his own hands. "This isn't what I expected, Margot, but if there's *any* chance I can salvage this—!" Will cuts himself off. Clenches his teeth. "I'll touch base when I know more. I wanted to give you as much heads up as possible."

"What if you can't?" She demands. *"What if you can't salvage it, what then?"*

We have to, Wilhelmina says.

"We have to," Will replies. "And I'm going to."

There is no other option.

There are no sirens, no flashing lights when Will pulls into Abel's neighborhood. That, at least, gives him an enormous sense of relief.

Maybe it's not that bad, Will thinks idly as he drives by the house and sees the windows dark. Maybe it was just more of a mess than Abel planned. Unfortunate, but not insurmountable. Flooring can be replaced. Drywall, too. It would be stressful as hell to try to make it happen on a tight window, but Will's positive he could do it if the alternative was going to jail.

He parks the car down the street from Abel's house behind a neighboring Porsche. He's depending on the Lexus' ability to blend in a high-brow suburb, but even then, Margot's coupe stands out. The other half of this depends on it being late enough that no one is awake.

His hair is tucked under a nondescript gray beanie, bundled into a weatherproof black jacket that is not nearly thick enough to keep him warm, but thin enough to run in if he has to. Will gets out of the car as casually as he can manage, snagging his duffel and slinging it over his shoulder. He locks the car and hops onto the sidewalk, walking purposefully but—he hopes—not in such a way that it

renders him suspicious. A friend coming in from out of town, perhaps. It's nearly the holidays, after all. Actually, it's Christmas Eve.

The realization nearly makes Will's steps stutter, but he forces himself onward. Down the sidewalk, up the front path, and frowns idly at the driveway, where he sees the silver sedan, Anna's small, sporty convertible, and a large, white SUV with Georgia plates that he can't identify—

The door opens before he reaches it, and a figure slips out into the night. Abel is stone-faced, dressed all in black, and Will's eyes slide from the car to the man, and a sinking feeling that starts when his expression doesn't change. When his eyes go from Will, and slide back to the car. Rest heavily upon it.

And, no. Oh, Will doesn't like that at all.

He stops still. Neither of them move. And when it becomes apparent that Abel can not or *will* not broach whatever trouble he's brought upon their heads, Will straightens his shoulders, and Wilhelmina crawls out from her den inside his mind. Settles inside his eyes, squares their shoulders, lifts their chin. Pins Abel like a butterfly speared by a needle.

"Show me," Will says.

And he does.

Will takes the steps up to the entry landing with a growing sense of dread, quickly slips a pair of plastic sleeves over his boots to protect them from contamination, but it's not until he crosses the threshold that he sees. Realizes that preparation can only go so far.

It's a fucking bloodbath.

Red splatters the walls, arterial spray arched over bookcases and entry tables, glass bowls and knick-knacks, the twisting staircase leading upstairs, and the railing broken across the lofted area above. Askew suitcases in the foyer, toppled over like ancient towers collapsed into dust. The telltale marks of blunt force impacts on the walls, made with the brutality of a conquering army. Smear patterns. More blood than a single person could ever lose, even in the worst of circumstances.

Will stares at Abel's back as he continues through the house, through a pitch black and narrow hallway. The whole place reeks of metal, the blood scent so strong that Will can smell nothing else.

He follows in silence. There is something stuck in his throat, but whether it's horror or the ticking time bomb of explosive outrage, he doesn't know.

There are drag marks on the hall rug. Abel brings him to the kitchen, and there are five bodies laid out on the tile floor, each of them butchered. The incisions are large; they match the chef's knife that still now lies on the counter in a pool of congealed blood.

Two of them are old, presumably a married couple. Two are middle-aged, another blonde woman and a brunette man. By resemblance, Will would assume the blonde is Annalise's sister; the man, her spouse—which would make the older couple her parents.

The last body is that of a child, a little girl no more than ten. She bears the least violence of all of them, slaughtered with the merciful cruelty of a slit throat. In the low light, Will can still see the dried tear tracks on her cheeks.

He killed her last, Will knows with certainty. She saw it all, and the fight was gone from her by the time he drew the blade across her neck. Her eyes were huge, wet, horror risen in her soul, her innocence betrayed by those tasked to protect her. Family. She was not his child, but he loved her; putting her down was not bloodlust, it was an act of mercy after he slaughtered her parents. Watching the light leave the eyes of this child, his niece, was what made him realize the magnitude of what he had done.

And Will's eyes, too, burn. There will be no turning back from this.

"Why?" Will whispers.

Gideon swallows tightly. It's all Will can hear among the silence of the dead. "She didn't tell me they were coming. All of a sudden they were all just. *Here.*"

"So you killed them?" he asks softly.

Surely they couldn't have all been like Annalise. Perhaps the hatred ran deep, extended to her family, her parents, her sibling, who all made her who she was, but a child? An innocent?

Will never meant for an innocent to die. And he knows, like he knows his name, like he knows his home, that Hannibal would *never* cross that line and become the hand of death that claimed a young child's life. The Ripper is a killer, and he is violent, a creature of the night. A predator. Some might call him a monster. But the Ripper is not an evil man.

Abel killing Annalise Gideon was not an evil act, but retribution. Some might call it justice. But this? "I can't cover this up, Abel."

He startles. And when Will looks at him, his eyes are wide. Huge. Sparking with anger. "What?"

Oh, but Will is so much angrier.

Wilhelmina prowls within him, agitated. Infuriated. She is dangerous, snarling softly as Will's fingers curl into claws. "Did I not tell you that this had to go perfectly?" he snaps. "That you had to listen to *every* word I said? It seems you listened to *none* of them." Will bares his teeth, gestures at the bodies at the hallway behind them, a sharp, cold thing, not so unlike a mongoose striking out at a cobra. They are both dangerous, yes. And a cobra can do an incredible amount of damage. But only one of them makes a habit of consuming the other whole. "Did you see what you did to the house? I only brought three gallons of detergent, Abel! There isn't enough shit in the world to destroy the evidence here—this isn't trace, this is a Jackson fucking Pollock!"

"There has to be something," Gideon snarls. He takes a menacing step toward Will, his expression dark, wild. "Fix this."

"Go fuck yourself," Will snarls. His mind races. There has to be something. *Something.* Some way to redeem this.

How the hell could he redeem *this?*

He looks down at Annalise's body; she received the worst of it, a multitude of stab wounds to the chest, her shirt torn to the point where there's hardly threads left to hold it together. It's so textbook it could make him sick.

But it's worse than that.

He can't pass this off as the Ripper's work.

"The Ripper isn't a family annihilator," Will says softly, wretchedly, and feels his plan falling to pieces around him. Abel stops dead in his tracks, and Will takes a breath. Swallows. Corrects himself. "I can't blame this on Mason *and* call him the Ripper, Abel. This isn't his profile. The FBI will see it from a mile away, they'll know it doesn't fit. They weren't supposed to know at all."

"Well—" Abel's voice is hoarse, breaks off. The panic is starting to settle in, Will can tell, now that he's not only faced with his actions, but has no one to validate his *stupid fucking decisions.*

"You *ruined* her body, Abel," Will snaps. Even his voice feels like glass in his mouth, but his mind is pinging from one opportunity to the next—if he changed his design, cut away the ruined flesh, disposed of her punctured organs to hide the violence she suffered, then maybe, *maybe* —"And even if I could hide *that*, the rest of them?" Will can feel his lips twitch toward a snarl. "The Ripper doesn't kill families. Certainly not children. And if I were to even *try* putting that tarnish on his legacy, it doesn't matter if it's me. He won't stand for it."

"What if we got rid of them?" Abel asks. He swallows, and when Will snaps to look at him, there is a void that stares back. "The others. No one would have to know."

If Annalise is found as a Ripper victim, and then the rest of her family is inevitably reported missing, there is no *way* that won't lead back to Abel—

But it doesn't matter, does it? Abel's going to get caught *long* before the connection is made.

"You have to understand," Will says slowly, "At this point, there's no saving you career or your life here. You're gonna have to run."

A muscle jumps in Abel's jaw. But he inhales, exhales, and nods once. "I suppose that's… fair."

You killed five people, of course it's fucking fair, Will stops himself from saying. No. Instead he nods. Decides. This is a crisis, but he is a creature of survival. He'll make it through this.

Abel won't, but he will.

"Okay," he says. Licks his parched lips, and tears his eyes away from the corpse of the little girl on Gideon's kitchen floor. "There's no room for error here, okay? You follow every word I fucking say from here on out, or we're both dead."

Gideon nods eagerly, faithfully. His mistake.

"We're going to bag these bodies and put them back in the SUV," he says. "I'll take Annalise. I'll finish the design, proceed as planned." Inhales. Exhales. "You're going to take the SUV and sink it in the Potomac. As far away as you can stand to get and still make it back. You're gonna need to steal a car—tell me you know how to do that."

Gideon's expression tightens. "I'm from the country. I've hotwired a truck or two, but I'm out of practice."

"Figure it out," Will says dispassionately, and his eyes narrow when Gideon's flash with irritation. "Hold onto whatever you steal. Get it back here, park it around the corner. Get whatever you need. Wait until just before sunrise to give me enough time to get everything arranged." Will's eyes follow splatter to splatter, smudge to smudge. There was a beautiful house here, underneath the death—not like Hannibal's, but nice, in that Stepford kind of way. Magazine-nice.

Not anymore. And not for much longer.

"Put your car in the garage. Siphon the gas out," he continues. "Pour it on the flammable surfaces. Disable your smoke alarms. Just before dawn, before your neighbors wake up and start going to work and walking their dogs, light it up and get to the rendezvous point in Annapolis to wait out the storm. In that time I'll post the article pointing the finger at Mason, and with your car in the garage, it'll take a while before they catch on that you're not also his victim. Wait a day, maybe two. Don't leave the damn place until you're ready to go, and go *far*— arson's not the Ripper's style, and sooner or later they're going to get the reports about your missing family and look into it. But I have Mason's hair." Will slips the cosmetic case out of his pocket, shows it to Abel. "Even if they come down on you for the rest of them, I'll make sure Mason goes down for Annalise. We have to let them think you're missing, but at least they won't be looking for you. Not at first. Probably not until after the Ripper gets to Mason. It won't take long, but it'll be long enough."

Gideon's face is stone. He looks at the room around them, the blood on the walls. "You want me to… burn the house down."

Will stares at him. Presses his lips together. "Do you see any other way?"

There isn't one, that much is true. It's not an ideal solution, not the perfect fix Will had hoped for. But it's all that either of them are going to get, and it's clear Abel realizes that when he shifts his weight, fidgets. He says nothing. What can he say? What protest could he *possibly* raise after what he's done?

But Will needs to hammer it home. Gideon needs to *know.* "The alternative, of course, is that I could walk out your front door right now and leave you with the mess you made," he adds, and makes sure Abel knows with every syllable how prepared he is to do exactly that. "I'm offering to save your ass after *you* fucked up a well-made plan. And if that happens again…"

Will doesn't intend to be fooled a second time, regardless.

But Abel's expression twists with something dark, something ugly—that simmering thing that lives inside him, seething with rage until it became… this. "What makes you think I'd let you leave?"

Oh. He means to be threatening. Malicious. Intimidating.

Well.

Wilhelmina pushes to the forefront of his mind, inhabits his eyes, opens her maw and exposes her fangs. She pins Abel Gideon with the full force of her rage in the form of a terrible smile. She laughs, and Will laughs with her—full-bodied, fully prepared to kill. She may yet still. "One of us was prepared for tonight, Doctor Gideon. It wasn't you. What makes you think you could stop me?"

It's not the response he expects. Gideon freezes, an opportunistic killer realizing there's a true predator in the room. Did he really think all the time Will spent living in the Ripper's mind and being courted by his terrible nature wouldn't have consequences? Will stalks forward, slow steps made purposeful. Blood squelches beneath the plastic shoe covers. He stops only when the bodies of Gideon's slaughtered in-laws are between them.

"It's not very smart to piss off a guy who thinks about killing people for a living."

Abel bares his teeth. "You've never killed anyone before. You said it yourself."

Will watches him, darkly amused. He cocks his head. “That doesn’t mean I haven’t *killed* before.” He looks down at the bodies, the summation from beginning to end of an entire family line, wiped off the map in a minute. “Don’t be an idiot, Abel. I’m the last ally you have.”

Gideon opens his mouth. Closes it. Glowers. And then, even the anger fades, though there is still something inside him that is visibly restless, pacing, aching to howl. Thirsty for blood, now that it’s whetted its appetite with the sweetness of vengeance and gluttonous overindulgence.

“Are you with me?” Will asks softly. “Or are you going to fight me?”

A clenched jaw. Averted eyes. Curling fingers, flexing tendons, and then—

“I’m with you,” he says. “I’ll get the bags.”

He told Abel he would bring her north, closer to the Verger Estate, which rests nearly on the Pennsylvania line. He doesn’t, but Abel won’t know that until her body is found and the first news reports hit, and by then it will be much too late.

He brings her to Herald Harbor on the Severn River, just north of Annapolis—a tributary that feeds into the Chesapeake Bay. It feels fitting.

The body is heavy, but not unmanageable; Will works under cover of darkness, Annalise spread over a protective layer of plastic that will prevent her blood from staining the ground. Her torso is all but ruined—the blade of the hunting knife slices away layers of flesh and ruined organs, and Will bags it all for disposal. He cannot help but think what a waste it is, though he’s sure he wouldn’t want to eat Annalise, anyway. She was a repulsive woman.

Though he wears gloves, there is a certain intimacy in holding a person’s innards in his hands—punctured gut, lacerated stomach, even her heart. Will removes it all, leaves her an empty cavity to be filled with his design. Pushes her limbs through the sleeves of a flowing white robe and hauls her upright.

It takes both more and less force than he expected to impale someone upon a metal gardening stake. Really, it’s no wonder Hannibal’s as muscular as he is if he does this with any regularity (and, of course, he does). Will slices flesh, small incisions that he uses to feed heavy-grade wire through, sturdy enough to support her arms as he would like them, and another adjacent to her spine to hold her head upright.

He uses a clean blade to slice the robe open from the collar down, but drapes the skirt to protect her modesty; in the empty hollow of her torso, Will places branches of holly. He had thought to use the clippings as a garland, but this is somehow better, more poetic. He collects twigs to fasten into the approximation of a nest that he sets inside the cradle of her pelvis. He leaves it open, empty, bare.

The FBI will see an empty nest, a broken home. Holly, prickly and hardy, traditionally believed to have thrived in the cold and dark, exactly the kind of woman she is. In her hands, he places a pair of silver goblets, one held above the other. He fills the top one with blood that will soon begin to congeal. The lower, brackish water from the bay. *The blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb,* as the saying goes. It’s so often misquoted, after all.

This is their covenant. Hannibal will see this scene and know it for what it is.

I'll find you in the sky.

Lastly, he unbinds her hair. It tumbles down around her shoulders, shockingly blonde. Will can't recall whether he ever saw her wear it down. It was always pulled back into some severe jogger's ponytail, making her face look so much sharper than it does now in her death. He wipes her face until it's clean, and at least the skin of her face is untouched, pale with death.

It's fitting, somehow, that she looks more pleasant in death than she did in life.

She is the angel of temperance, a force of moderation and caution, where Abel had none. And for that sin, Will extracts the cosmetic case and draws out the hair he took from Abel's jacket, pinches it between his gloved fingers, and places it carefully upon the nest within her. The placement is too precarious to be simple trace from those who share living space. No, forensics will find this and call it damning evidence.

Will takes a step back. Objectively, he sees the Ripper's work, though it's only within his own heart that he feels Hannibal here.

Will nods to himself and packs up his things. It's still dark yet, but this area does get *some* traffic—she'll surely be found when the morning light rises. He regrets the necessity of ruining some poor soul's Christmas by having them find this, but, well—it's necessary. It is what it is.

The SUV should be sinking beneath the waters of the Potomac right about now; Will wonders how long Annalise's family planned their holiday vacation, and how long it will be before someone notices they're missing.

Well, it doesn't matter. Abel will be caught before that, anyway.

Will takes the tools and stores them, the plastic ground covering and the guts and bags them, but not before he puts a rock within the bag to weigh it down. He'll drop it in the bay somewhere, miles from here, on his way to his next stop. He takes a heavily-needled pine bough and lifts it, and sweeps his boot prints clean from the ground as he walks backwards from the woods to where he parked the coupe. He leaves no trace behind.

When he's back at the car, Will strips from the plastic suit and the gloves, then puts them a spare contractor bag. Before long, everything in the trunk of Margot's coupe is bagged and double-bagged, the interior immaculate—and not a spot of anything when Will shines the blue light wand over the cavity.

And then, there alone in the dark, he strips down to skin. Takes off the skintight tactical clothing and the pair of military-style boots that were two sizes too big. Clips the band of a bra behind his back, and tucks each soft foam cup full with the spare pairs of winter socks he'd used to hide the difference in his shoe size. Tugs a blouse on over his head, and takes a moment to adjust to the visual of having breasts. It's… something. Not strange, per se, but different. He cannot tell whether he likes it or finds it unsettling. Content to ignore the feeling, Will wiggles into tight, soft equestrian leggings, and steps into rider's boots that zip up his calf, and pulls on a woman's peplum winter coat, and sways to make sure the skirt is not caught on anything. All good.

He gets in the car. Looks in the mirror. Peels off the hat and takes down his hair, fluffing his damp bangs, before he leans over to the glove box. From it, he takes a pouch of cosmetics and a velcro arm splint. Pushes up the sleeve, and straps himself in; turns on the light, and starts his process.

He knows her face better than his own. He knows exactly what parts to highlight and which to soften to change his appearance as well as any artist can paint a portrait on a canvas.

And then he calls.

"Tonight?" she asks.

Will inhales, feels the tender muscles in his throat shift as he adjusts his breath and mimicks her voice and firmly replies, "Tonight."

He drops Annalise's organs in the bay, watches them sink beneath the current. Disposes of the gloves beneath the litter in the trail-end bin of a state park. It leaves him only with the backpack containing his clothes and the larger duffel that holds what remains of his tools and forensic chemicals. He puts the backpack within the duffel, one large bag that looks so similar to the one that held Margot's riding gear.

He closes the trunk. Climbs into the driver's seat. Pulls onto the highway, and heads north to the Verger Estate.

There's no going back now. It's do or die.

The LED headlights pierce the dark as Will pulls onto the property for Muskrat Farm. They light everything in a cold bluish glow—the reaching branches of barren trees that fade away as he comes upon the Verger Estate, the enormous swaths of frost-frozen grass, the distant glimmers of warm light that come from the insides of the barns and stables.

The arching wrought iron gates are as familiar as they are imposing. Will deliberately does not look up at the security cameras he knows are mounted above, ever-watching with their all-seeing eyes.

He rolls down the window, and the bite of the cold stings his face as he leans out to touch the number pad and key in Margot's personal security code. During daylight hours, there would have been someone in the security office to recognize her car and open it automatically. But this works to his advantage—after all, with Margot's car and Margot's code and what could arguably be Margot's darkened silhouette in the driver's seat, complete with casted arm, no one will question the identity of the driver.

It's what he's counted on. And as the gate rolls open, a well-oiled thing that does not dare to screech, there is a sense of breathless anxiety and a hunter's anticipation that perches just under his chin, poised to howl.

He parks the sportscar between two others beneath the sheltered veranda, toward the end of the line where the shadows are deep and dark. Will leaves the fob inside the car, for no one would *dare* to steal from the Vergers, and it's standard practice so their valets might move them as needed in the morning. He rounds the vehicle and takes the duffel from the trunk, holding it like it's a heavier

burden than it is; Margot's certainly no slouch, but neither is she as strong as Will, and he does his best to adopt the echoes of her physicality as he moves through the courtyard to the house. There can be no doubt in the eyes of security once he disappears from the radar *exactly* who was moving about so late at night.

He glances up when he sees a shadow move in a familiar window: Margot's. She'll follow him down shortly, sure to stay out of sight. No one knows a home better than a resident of it, after all.

Will loops around the front, toward the side door of the house where the cameras no longer reach. From there, he slips around the side of the garage and carries the bag to the stables, as Margot would be expected to do after a long day away, should anyone see him in their rounds. But he ducks into the adjacent swine barn, the pens around the perimeter where the sows and suckling pigs are sequestered away from the rest of the herd, basking in the glow of the incubation heat lamps that take the edge off the cold. They squeal when they see him; Will wonders whether they make such a racket because they believe him to be Margot, crying out for her indulgent and unusual kindness—or whether they know from their superior sense of smell that he is not.

He drops the duffel in the center of the room, the dirt floor scattered with hay. Above his head are exposed wooden beams from the ceiling and roof; there are meat hooks looped up and over, out of the way. It presents a macabre and unsettling mental image, knowing that this room is made to be a nursery and is simultaneously prepared for immediate butchering. It's exactly the sort of thing that Mason probably finds hilarious.

All the better for Will's designs.

There are no cameras in the barns, only up toward the house where the valuable property is stored. Here, they rely on the rounds of security personnel. At this time of night, they only go through once an hour, or perhaps every other. On a night this cold—and a holiday, no less—Will suspects the latter.

He takes off the coat and cast and opens the duffel; tucks them inside as he pulls out his pants, his oversized boots, removes the socks from his bra, and puts them all back on. It won't do to implicate Margot in this, after all. Her identity is his alibi—and too, he is hers.

The black boots are on, his moisture-wicking shirt and pants donned once more, and Will is pulling the plastic suits from the duffel when Margot enters the barn. Like him, she's dressed in black from head to toe. Like him, her jaw is set and her eyes are dark.

"What are those?" she asks. Her eyes linger heavily on the plastic suits. "They look like the hazmat gear the guys in the processing plant wear."

"That's the idea," Will replies. He unrolls the one he used to display Annalise and unzips it; gestures to the other with a jerk of his chin. When she picks it up, holds it up to the light, he notices it's just slightly smaller than his own.

Not the same size. Which means—

Will swallows hard and averts his eyes. He can't allow himself to be caught up in thoughts of Hannibal right now. He needs all of his mind present and focused. The Ripper would expect nothing less if he were here tonight.

He'll be here in spirit. Someday perhaps in body, if all goes well.

“Put it on.” His voice is hoarse; Will clears his throat and carries on. “And you’re sure he’s gonna make the rounds this late?”

“And miss the chance to torture the animals after a secret meeting with the corporate lawyer I wasn’t supposed to know about?” Margot grits out, and curses under her breath as she struggles into the suit, grimaces at the feel of it. It’s certainly far from finery, he’ll give her that. “I can’t imagine he’d miss it.”

“The hell’s a lawyer doing taking meetings this time of night?”

“When you’ve got money like my father, anyone will stay up to any time to do any*thing* he wants.” Margot and Will draw their zippers up in unison, and then flip their heads over to pull back their hair as well as they can manage. “And I guess Mason’s whole *thing* put him in a bad mood and he picked a fight with another heir. Fucked up some big deal Daddy was working on with the Italians. They took it as an insult and called off the whole thing, and after the Tyson thing falling through, he’s *livid.*” She snorts derisively. “It wouldn’t be a problem if my brother were on a leash. He *needs* me to run PR and he doesn’t even know it. If it wasn’t for… *this,* I swear someone else would be getting to Mason, probably sooner than later.”

“Then good thing we’re getting to him sooner,” Will replies. He bares his teeth, not quite a smile and though Margot doesn’t quite return it, he sees the agreement in her eyes. She’s too close to the matter to find much pleasure in it. Instead, she watches and waits like a wolf on a choke chain. She doesn’t want the freedom, she *needs* it.

Will takes the smaller switchblade from the pocket of the duffel. He holds it out to Margot handle-first, the blade pinched between his fingers. He follows it with a sterile pair of gloves. “I know it’s generally a bad idea to give someone a weapon if they don’t know how to use it, but we both know Mason’s armed anyway. I’d rather you have a fighting chance.”

“Thanks.” She licks her lips, and looks somewhat comforted and concurrently disturbed by the honesty of that statement. “This could go badly, huh?”

“There’s two of us,” Will replies. He leans down into the duffel and extracts the heavy-handled rigid hunter’s knife. He tells himself the butchering will be the same. Maybe it’ll be even better. He’s never hated a deer, after all, but he certainly hates Mason. “Just one of him. And we’re expecting *him,* not the other way around. What’s most important,” he continues, and lifts his eyes to her, “is that you don’t get any marks in the scuffle. Me, they’ll never know I was here. You, well. They’re going to investigate you as soon as they find his body, and you’ll be under their eye once they see the video of you arriving home that late at night. Did you ping the door on your way out?”

“And left my window unlocked for the way back in,” she replies with a tight nod. “No alarm on that one. I usually leave it open for fresh air, no security log.”

“Good.” Will is past the point of worrying if she’ll make the climb back in one piece. She can always say she was sneaking *out,* after all. Who would know differently, when the logs would back her up?

The digital log will show when Mason leaves, of course. But if Will has any say, he’ll never make it back to the main house again.

“Alright.” Their hair is secured, and they themselves are armed. Now there is only waiting. “Now we get out of sight and wait for him to show up. Be able to move quickly; we want to take him by surprise. The longer this gets drawn out, the worse it’ll be for us.”

“You can hide in pen four,” Margot says. “She won’t be aggressive as long as you’re not.”

Will nods and grabs the duffel bag, hauls it over his shoulder; climbs over the door so it doesn’t squeak, since he’s not sure how far away Mason is. He could be anywhere. That’s half the adrenaline of the situation, but not in a good way. The pig lifts her head when his feet hit the dirt floor, bristles at the show of the knife, but when Will puts it down, pushes it away so it’s *just* within arm’s reach, she seems content to watch him warily. Across the barn, Margot does the same, but picks a different pen —in the lull, he can hear her murmuring softly to the sow inside.

And in the quiet, Will’s nervous heartbeat slows.

This is going to work. He and Margot are prepared, they have the element of surprise on their side, they are armed, and they both have far more to lose than Mason. It makes them desperate, but their planning makes them calm. It’s a hell of a combination. Certainly a dangerous one.

He’s going back to Hannibal tonight. Jack will be livid in the morning, but Will can point him in the right direction, and by the end of the day, Abel Gideon will be theirs. The truth will come out. Hannibal will be angry to have the Ripper’s name besmirched by someone as banal as a family annihilator, but he’s a practical man. He’ll see the necessity. Their love is a strong enough thing to withstand the trespass, of that Will is sure. If he denies Hannibal his identity for the sake of his life, but gives him something he sorely wants in the process, it’ll soften the blow.

He hopes.

This was not the original plan, but it’ll work. It *will* work.

It has to work.

And then—

He’s not sure what he hears, but Will meets Margot’s eyes between the slats of the pens, and he knows she’s heard it too. They sink into crouches, concealed by the heavy wooden gates, and await the angry footsteps that crunch through the frost outside. The aggressive screech and blast of arctic cold as the barn door is wrenched open and left open.

Mason does not prowl like a hunting cat, but jitters like a rabid beast. His eyes are dark, wild, and he is blind to the footprints in the dirt. Cannot feel the danger in the air as he enters, stalks to a pen with a knife in his hand—not either of the ones flanking the door, but one clear across the barn that exposes his back. He is as predictable as he is careless; after all, what does it matter to a man like Mason Verger if anyone sees what he does? The only one willing to give him so much as a slap on the wrist is already up inside the house.

The sows rise and racket as they sense a monster in their midst; piglets whine and squeak as they hide behind their mothers, if they are old enough to do so. But when Mason lifts one by the scruff of its neck, it is one that’s barely large enough to fight. Large enough to scream, and to see, but small nonetheless.

Even amongst the babies, it seems Mason prefers small prey.

Will’s jaw sets; he knows what’s coming before it happens, and he’s prepared for the scream—

“Put the pig down, Mason.”

Will's eyes widen as he looks through the slats, sees Margot already out of her pen, her eyes bright with anger. Her knife is not in her hand, but oh, Mason's is when he rounds on her.

One would expect fury at being interrupted. But, no. On the contrary, he looks delighted, and it's enough to sicken Will's stomach. Mason's gaze drags over her body, a gross violation, and he smiles. "Well, well. What are you doing here, Margot?" Cocks his head. His smile grows an edge. "What are you wearing?"

Will curses silently, vehemently. God *damn* it, is it so much to ask that *anyone* does as he asks?

He climbs out of the pen, thankful that Mason's back is turned to him, that the animals are riled enough that his sounds go unheard, and then his feet are safely on the floor. The pig is still in Mason's hand. The knife is in the other.

"You can't keep doing this shit, Mason," Margot says. She burns like righteous fury, one who knows the necessities of her trade, but does not stand for cruelty within it. "Killing good livestock is no better than stealing. You think Daddy would be happy about this?"

"Pops supports culling the herd," Mason hisses. He shakes the piglet, and it squeaks. "I think our herd could use a little more culling, don't you? Weak stock. Bad blood."

The implication is clear. Margot meets Will's eyes over his shoulder, just a flicker, before she looks back at her brother. She lifts her chin, squares her shoulders, and the uncomfortable expression on her face smooths into glass. "You're right."

But for all Mason's many failings, he's not a stupid man. His shoulders tense, and he turns halfway—just enough to see Will and the hunting knife held loosely in his hand.

A flicker of something crosses his face, a primal fear under pressure like bees in a jar, shaken until agitated enough to swarm. But it's there and gone again before it takes root, and Mason's overconfidence sweeps over him again. Hubris may be his weakness, but a rabid boar is not an opponent to underestimate.

"Oh, Margot," Mason drawls and grins. "You have been naughty, haven't you? Whatever will Papa do when he finds out you let that *freak* back on the grounds?"

"He won't find out," Will replies calmly. "Or at the very least, you won't be the one to tell him."

"Did you bring your pet freak here to scare me, baby sister?" Mason shoots her a look; and then, with a casual cruelty, tosses the piglet back into the pen. It shrieks when it hits the ground. "I'm almost proud. But you should have chosen a better champion. Maybe your little girlfriend. I bet she would have put up a better fight."

Margot's jaw tightens. Will tells himself it's no worse than the sound they'd have heard if Mason had gutted the thing in the first place. Locks compassion away in the back of his brain, and Wilhelmina growls her agreement: there's no room for mercy here. "You had my car run off the road."

Mason leers at him. "Obviously you didn't learn your lesson as well as I heard you did. Maybe I'll treat you to a repeat performance."

"Or maybe if you had done your dirty work yourself, you'd have done it right the first time. You're not gonna get another chance." His fingers tighten around the knife at the memory of the blood, of the pain, of the fear—"If I remember right, I have a promise to fulfill. And I always keep my promises."

Mason's pupils dilate in the low light. The grin he wears is truly unpleasant. "You see Will, Wilhelmina, whatever the hell your name is. The thing about promises is that they require follow-through." And then he turns that gaze to Margot. "Do you have what it takes? I do. And I can think of one or two I've made to you, baby sister."

Then he lunges.

Will is after him immediately. Margot's experienced with Mason's tactics and she dodges out of the way; too, Will is faster and has the added benefit of Mason's back turned to him. He snags Mason by the collar and with a harsh wrench, drags him backward, but is forced to release when Mason swipes backward with his knife. Margot scrambles for her switchblade, holds it in a white-knuckled grip. They've traded sides, though Mason is still between them, forced into yet another reprieve.

And Mason looks almost *proud.* "Have you ever cut anything before, Margot?"

Margot swallows tightly. She doesn't answer, but it's answer enough.

"Shame," he tuts. Gestures casually with his knife, a professor giving a lecture. "It feels *good* to hurt things. Makes us feel *alive,* you know? Here, let me show you."

Wilhelmina expands inside him, a creature unfurling from the safety of her den to reveal her true size. She fills the empty corners of Will, and not just the space behind his eyes, or between the bars of his ribs, or even just in his gut. She fills each cell, each nail, each tooth. Her weighted and momentous presence inhabits his arms, his hands, his legs, his feet, the set of his spine, and every nerve that makes up the body they share. And though Will has found happiness with Hannibal, has found contentment in their relationship, this— *this* is being whole. This is wrenching open the cage door and letting the wolf run wild, free.

Why should he leash her? They want the same thing. If Mason's attention is turned away from Margot, that means she's out of harm's way. Will can do exactly what he's wanted to do to Mason Verger ever since he was left nude and shivering and infuriated, and Mason was left with the realization that Will was not the young girl he'd expected to gleefully torture without recompense.

Male or female, neither and both, Will is a creature of calculated retribution.

And when Mason approaches, they sink into a posture built for movement, for evasion and aggression. They're ready for the hunt, have all they need with claws and fangs; and with that thought comes the realization that Will doesn't need a knife for killing. Just for butchering.

He holds the hunting blade away from his body. Opens his fingers. It hits the ground with a *thud,* and Will kicks it out of the way in a flurry of dust and hay. When Mason's steady pace pauses, when he stares at Will with manic suspicion and the conflicted desire to ignore danger in favor of causing true *hurt,* Will bares his teeth in a grin.

Mason's easy. He's always been easy. "What's the matter?" Will purrs. "Worried you can't overpower a freak with a concussion? I know, it might be a little closer to a fair fight than you'd like. But don't worry about embarrassing yourself in front of Margot, I'm sure she won't mind."

A vein jumps in Mason's jaw. His fingers flex. His glasses are askew, an external indicator of his internal insanity, and his eyes sharpen as he takes a step forward, and then another. "I'm gonna put you through the processor and send your doctor a nice gift basket."

Will's smile widens. Against his better judgement, he can't help it when a laugh rips from his chest, brutally elated at the thought of it. He imagines the despair, the horror, the rage. He imagines the tragedy of it, so keen it makes his heart hurt. But he imagines the reach of Hannibal's fury—matched only by the loss of his sister. He's filled with the sudden certainty that if it came to that, Hannibal would savor him. None of him would go to waste. And there would be *nothing* of Mason Verger left to find by the time Hannibal was done.

Though it only seems to egg Mason on when his fear tactics fail.

Mason lashes out and Will catches him at the wrist, twists it and he howls, though he doesn't hear the telltale snap of it breaking, and nor does Mason drop the knife. Will goes for his neck, but Mason goes lower—his fist catches Will in the gut, drives the breath from him. It's a momentary hesitation, but Mason twists his arm out of Will's grip, brings it up again, blade out—

Will blocks his swing, forearm to forearm, but his ribs are screaming and physically, Mason *is* bigger, stronger. His arm pushes in, pushes close, and Will's instincts flare and howl at the proximity of the blade inching closer to his throat—

He brings his other arm up between them. Strikes Mason in the sternum, then drives upward, pushes his head back. Knows better than to get his fingers near Mason's mouth, and catches his chin in the vee of his thumb and forefinger, pushes back and *up,* then ducks underneath his arm, under the blade, reaches around to pry it from his hand—

Margot comes up behind Mason, every line of her body strung tight with desperation as she swings her knife down toward his back, but Mason kicks back at her, catches her in the leg, and she goes down hard. Drops the knife. His forward momentum wrenches his arm from Will's hands.

"Shit," Will snaps. He drives inward with his elbow toward Mason's side in an effort to disable him, swings his leg around and in to catch Mason behind the ankle and take him down, too.

And then Mason grabs him by the hair. Will ducks down, which rips the elastic out, and his eyes water, since his curls certainly don't make it easy to extract himself. It wrenches him to the side, but he's determined—rolls forward, barks a curse as he feels at least a few stray strands pull from his scalp, tucks his chin and somersaults until he is on his knees again. Stands, and yanks Margot up by the scruff of her plastic suit.

Close to her ear as he shoves her to her feet, Will hisses, "Stop hesitating!"

She looks back over her shoulder, eyes bright and huge and sparking with anger—

—and that is the moment Mason reaches out and twines his hand in the ends of Will's wild curls and drags him backward. The sharp edge of the blade perches precariously at his throat.

Will swallows. Warmth trickles down his neck and inside his suit, and he knows it's not just sweat.

Fuck.

"Did you think you knew her better than I do?" Mason croons, and pulls Will's hair *hard.* "My sweet baby sister. Family is everything, isn't it, Margot? Blood is blood. And only blood can repay blood."

Will knows at once what he means to do. He narrowly avoids Wilhelmina opening her maw, screaming with laughter, because *could he really be so blind?*

“Margot,” Mason says. “I want you to know, I respect what you’ve done. Really, I do! And you know who else would, if you follow through? Papa.”

Panting, sweating, Margot stares at him, and Will’s heavy-handled hunting knife shakes in her hand. Her eyes flicker to Will and back—and then widen with understanding. She breathes, “What?”

“Maybe you are a born Verger,” Mason wheedles; digs his knife in deeper, and that drip steadies into a slow trickle. “And you can prove it right here, right now.”

Even the pigs are silent. Margot says nothing, but she blanches.

Will can hear the grin in Mason’s voice. It’s almost hypnotic, if one were to drench hypnosis in radioactive waste. It’s toxic. Repulsive. And yet, so very promising. “Imagine what Pops would say if you killed the freak that attacked your brother. Sever yourself from the goddamned Graham line forever—just imagine how proud he’d be.”

Will says nothing, doesn’t move. Oh, yes, Mason *is* really that delusional, that absolutely fucking *batshit insane* if he thinks he can undo everything with a few pretty words.

“Just imagine, Margot—you’d have a position in the company. Things would be better for you than they’ve ever been. He’d probably even let you keep your sweet little side piece, as long as you married well and popped out a few kids. You’d prove yourself to him. Everything you ever wanted, right? More than you expected.” Mason licks his lips; the sound beside Will’s ear is repulsive. “I won’t even mention this little *accident,* right? It’ll be our little secret. And who’s gonna miss *him,* that doctor? Maybe a little extra money in his pocket. He seems like he appreciates nice things. Or maybe we send Cordell, make him go away. Either way, no more problems. What do you say?”

Margot stares at Mason for a while. Her eyes flicker to the slow stream of Will’s blood as it pools inside the plastic, disappearing into his black shirt. He wonders which of his propositions gained that steely glint in her eyes as they slide from Mason and back to Will again, linger, hold.

And then she nods, slowly. Just once.

Mason lets out a breath, a heady victory too soon celebrated. He holds Will’s hair securely. “Come here, Margot.”

She comes.

“Put your knife at his neck,” Mason says, and wrenches Will’s head back to expose his throat so hard he hisses.

Wilhelmina, though, is not concerned. She knows kin when she sees it. Even when Margot puts the blade at his jugular right beside Mason’s, so gently it barely touches the skin—for she holds Will’s eyes, not her brother’s.

Her voice is soft, and it breaks. “I’m so sorry,” she whispers.

Will doesn’t nod. Doesn’t accept, nor does he condemn. He waits in patient silence.

She could kill him, but—

Will throws his head back as hard as he can; hears the crunch of metal, glass, and fragile flesh. Mason’s hand slips and his knife catches the side of Will’s throat, part of his hair. Several thick,

unruly curls get stuck in the collar of Will's protective suit as he drops, and Margot drives her blade straight back through Mason's belly.

—she won't.

Will reaches back and wraps his hand in the severed strands before they can fall, pulls them out and shoves them inside the suit. Disgusting, sure, but anything is better than having to purge evidence from this scene. There's a thin slice on the side of his neck, not six inches from his scar, but nothing major; it's not even bleeding as badly as Hannibal's bite did.

It can wait a minute. And Will wants to see this.

Mason stares at Margot with wide, watering eyes; reflexive from Will breaking his nose, surely. His mouth opens and shuts like a landed fish, and their father's knife slips from his fingers. Hits the ground.

His mouth stretches into a slow, wide smile, and Margot blanches. Panics. She wrenches upward. Blood pours from the wound; fluids Will doesn't want to name, too, as she slices through his gut from pelvis to sternum.

Blood pours over her gloved hand, but the nitrile and the suit do their job to protect her from contamination. Margot pulls the knife out with a sickening *squelch,* and like the metal was holding him up, when it's removed, Mason falls to his knees. He's infuriated, and equally defeated.

"You're right. I *am* a born Verger," Margot bites out. Each word slips through her teeth, drenched in years of pain and fury, now unleashed. "Blood repays blood. Yours… and mine."

Will watches dispassionately as Mason collapses, his blood spilling over the dirt. Will's glad to see there's no stray drips of his own, but that may change unless he stems this flow. He swallows hard and goes to the duffel—hauls it out with a hiss and a curse and wraps a roll of bandage low around his neck. It's a minor thing, not so different from a shaving cut, but he's lucky that's all it was. He was too mindful of someone who needed his help, and it nearly cost him his life.

When we do it again, Wilhelmina murmurs lovingly, and a shiver passes down Will's spine that feels like a gentle hand, *we'll be with someone who knows better.*

This isn't over yet, Will reminds her. *We have to make it out of this first.*

Then string up the swine and go home. Our love deserves to wake up with us there.

She's right.

Margot is pale, shaking, but when Will turns to her, there is something settled in her face. Calm. The adrenaline is pumping through her body, but she's not horrified by what she's done. Already, it's changing her.

He suspects that after this, neither of them will ever entirely be the same.

"Our work's not over," Will says softly. "Help me with the body."

They spread out a sheet of plastic in the heated horse barn. Will strips from his clothes, the suit, until he's nude. Margot cleans his wound until it's done bleeding; modesty means nothing after everything they've shared, and she, too, strips from all she wears. They bundle everything in the center of the tarp, then pack it into the duffel; she'll take it to the processor shortly to see it incinerated, along with the rest of the waste, and Mason's knife.

Will figures explaining a few missing plastic suits to Hannibal will be easier than explaining himself from behind bars.

And it'll be easier to explain the providence of the curls that tickle the nape of his neck, the sides of his jaw, brush the tops of his shoulders, but go no lower at all. His hair had been heavy, and now the loss of the weight, more than anything, is what unsettles him. He knows it's a necessity to echo the silhouette he presented to the public, to escape suspicion as Margot's double. How could he be, when his hair was short before the video was taken?

But it feels like loss. It feels like being unmoored. And Will is reeling, rocking on the tides when he dresses in a tee shirt and old jeans, washes his face with a makeup wipe that goes in with the waste, and bundles into the spare black coat he brought with him. Will trades his boots for a pair of Margot's, which he covers with plastic protectors until he's off the Estate.

Everything burns tonight—but with any luck, maybe they won't.

"Do you need help?" Will asks.

"No," she says. Wiggles the duffel at him, all of it contained and prepared to burn. "Our incinerator is prepped to three thousand degrees to safely dispose of animal waste. It'll take care of everything, even the steel." She exhales slowly. "What about you?"

"Well, my car's dead. I didn't really have any warning to set things up for transportation home. I know you can't leave," he adds in a rush, "and I don't want to take a security vehicle; it'll be the first thing they look for. It's probably just best to walk to the bus stop."

Margot frowns deeply. "The bus stop? That's at least twenty minutes away. It's cold, Will—I don't want you—"

"What choice do we have?" he asks. He pulls his coat in tighter around him; touches his phone in his pocket like a touchstone that maybe, *maybe* if he prays enough, it'll get him home to Hannibal tonight. "You need to get the stuff in the incinerator and get inside. I can't take one of your vehicles. It's our only option. I have a plan. And besides, it'll give me time to… to mentally write the article I need to post."

But I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep.

Margot's lips press together. She looks deeply unhappy, but not in a way that has anything to do with the body haunting the grounds of her family home right now. "If you're sure…"

"I'm sure," Will replies, and pats the pocket of his jeans. "I have cash. I'll just… hide in plain sight." A breath, a sigh. She doesn't want to let him go, but she's wise enough to know she has no other choice. This is their most crucial hour. "I should get going. It's probably best we don't talk until some of this blows over. I'm sure Jack is gonna be up my ass about the Ripper thing. I don't want him connecting me here, for your sake."

Margot nods. She inhales quietly through her nose and lets it out. There's no heat to it, no sign she's breathed at all. "Then I'll get this to the incinerator." They exit the barn, stand together in the dark, surrounded by the eerie stillness of the barren trees, the winding paths that disappear into the brush. She looks at him, clean of blood, but a spectre of death all the same. She's reaped her vengeance tonight. "Thank you."

Will presses his mouth into the shape of a tight smile, and tries to remember what it is to be simple and sweet, to keep his aura unthreatening. To become Hannibal's version of Will, not the Ripper's, as he echoes her nod, accepting. "If something happens…"

"It won't." Her voice is sharp, unwavering. "But if it does…"

Will's mouth is dry, but he swallows regardless. Inclines his head.

Nothing will happen. But if it does, he'll be thankful.

"Good luck," Margot says.

Will dons his leather gloves and feels only the weight of his phone in his pocket, SIM tucked in his breast pocket. Cash zipped in beside it, along with that folded slip of paper. No weapon. No bag. Only himself.

He needs to get home safely. He needs to post his amended article. Those are the only things on his mind as the dawn approaches, cold as they come. "Thanks. You too."

Will slips between the trees, walks until he can no longer hear the sounds of the animals, until the Verger Estate fades behind him. Coated in the winter's frost, the woods are lovely, dark and deep.

He heads for home.

The walk is cold. He knew it would be, and yet it's brutally unpleasant until the moment he gets on the bus, fading into the bustle of the pre-work rush, the last day before a major holiday. It'll take a few connections to get him into Baltimore proper, but with this many people about, he'll easily pass under the radar as just another stubbly college-aged boy on their phone, slumped against the side of the bus going somewhere other than where he started.

He writes about Abel's interest in him. He writes about his home life, a self-made country boy who found himself in the claws of a ladder-climbing socialite whose clutches took a turn for the abusive. He writes about Abel's surgical career. Writes into existence the profile that matches the Ripper in only the barest bones. Writes about the death of Annalise.

But on second thought, , Will removes the revelation about Mason's death. His body has likely not even discovered yet; Will wants to give Margot more time to dispose of the evidence, to get safely inside, for her brother's corpse to be discovered and reported organically. Will can always update his article later. The FBI's knowledge of Abel's spat with Mason will tie those threads together on their own without his interference.

It's almost over. Less than an hour to home, and he can post this article and go to *bed* and have this all be done.

Will tucks his phone back in his pocket, gets off the bus outside the hospital, the final piece of this plan. The hour is early yet, but the hospital pharmacy is always open, crucial for discharged patients to get whatever they need to deal with whatever wounds they've been dealt. And Will's wounds, while minor, were clearly on record.

Will slips his hand into his breast pocket, catching the folded piece of paper between his fingers. It's textured just slightly, and he smooths the pad of his thumb over the tight loops and swirls of handwriting that is *almost* familiar. Only slightly off, but there's only so much he can do—

"Can I help you?" Asks the tired-looking woman at the counter.

"Yeah, I have a script from my doctor for my concussion," Will murmurs, and gently unfocuses his eyes as he hands it over; sways on his feet. Rubs at the back of his neck where it feels naked, exposed. Cold. "Uh—lorazepam, half-mil tabs."

"Alright. Name?"

"Will Graham. Think I'm in your system."

"Just a moment." A flurry of keys; Will braces himself on the counter, and the woman looks up with open pity. "You can take a seat. Shouldn't be more than a minute."

Will takes careful steps to the chairs in the hallway, sinks heavily into one and folds himself in half. Places his forehead on his knees, and just for a moment, closes his eyes. It's not all for show—the exhaustion is catching up with him, deep down to the bone. He wishes he was home. And once he squares up this part of his alibi…

"Mr. Graham?"

Face hidden, Will feels no compunction in wincing openly. Even yesterday, people hesitated in assigning him a title. And now, hair cut into a practical but necessary bob, stubble growing in, no one even blinks. It makes him feel itchy, not quite right in his skin.

It will pass, Wilhelmina replies. *We'll remake ourselves again. Keep moving.*

So he gets up. Accepts the paper bag and the capsule within, pays a few dollars cash. Mission completed and altogether *mostly* successful, he heads for the door, for the final bus to Hannibal's neighborhood—

Waiting at the hospital entrance is a black SUV, and a familiar black man leaning against the side of it. His hands are shoved in his pockets, face twisted and grim as he locks eyes with Will and opens the door.

The back door.

Will exhales slowly, and his heart sinks into his belly.

Shit.

Jack pats him down, but not well enough. All the while, he says nothing. He leverages his silence like a furious parent, but Will is not his child. Will is not a child at all.

This is what he knows:

One: Jack knows something. He would not be here otherwise. He must've been waiting for Will's phone to connect to a wireless network, and even though he hadn't posted the article yet, he had pinged *Analysis* while editing the page . If they've been watching the site traffic, maybe that was enough—for surely, if they had been following him physically, he would have been accosted far sooner, and by more than just Jack Crawford.

Two: he's headed to an unknown location with no guarantee he'll be allowed communication. Legally, they can hold him up to seventy-two hours. And the FBI is not above subverting the law, he knows that much. Depending on which clause they decide to cite as justification, there may be no guarantee at all that he'll be allowed a lawyer. Inevitably, if that's what they decide to do, Will is sure to be off the radar until then. He'll miss his flight without so much as a *goodbye.*

Three: Hannibal has no idea where Will is or where he has gone. And he'll have nothing to go on except the headlines, once they hit…

Unless Will decides to make them, himself.

Will glances up at the rearview mirror—Jack's eyes are firmly on the road, so he takes the opportunity to slip his hand into his pocket, extract the SIM card, and slot it into his phone.

Come on, come on, come on…

The screen lights up as it reconnects: 4G LTE.

Will radiates with frustrated fury, desperate need, and silent apology. He has only seconds before Jack notices, no time to write anything secretly in the source code, which is hard enough even *without* the mobile platform.

He has only enough time to post, and so he does.

The Ripper Exposed — The Deadly Double Life of Abel Gideon

And then Jack looks up in the rearview, meets Will's steely gaze, and swears. Swerves. Takes them to the side of the road and throws the SUV into park, comes around the side of the car with his gun drawn—

Come find me, Will howls to the universe in silence, a prayer finally perfected through bared teeth. *I'm ready.*

3:20

Chapter Notes

I always joked this fic would be up over 400k by the end. I hate that I proved myself right. And to all of you who have joined the ride recently, welcome! You joined during the most stressful part of the fic, so seriously, kudos to you all. And to everyone who has been here since the start, we're nearly there, I promise. There's probably only one more chapter after this one, which... is emotionally more than I can handle, but I hope to have this fic finished by the end of the month. That's my plan and I'm sticking to it, forreal forreal this time.

Anyway, enjoy the crazy, and 23k of absolute fucking chaos.

The interrogation room is cold. Of course, that's by design—to make those in custody as uncomfortable as possible so that they might seek to cut a deal and end their purgatory in frigid, utilitarian hell.

They took Will's cash, his phone, his jacket. They took the boots that Margot gave him. It leaves him only in a thin white tee-shirt, threadbare jeans, and damp socks. They swabbed the slice on his neck and under his nails. His wrists smart from how tightly they locked the cuffs before they pushed him into this room and left him to stew.

They won't find anything. They don't *have* anything. And they certainly won't get anything out of Will. He's prepared for silence. As long as it takes. The intimidation tactics are straight out of a bad movie, but Will knows every step in this playbook.

They leave him to stew, and then they send in the cavalry.

It's Miriam, grim-faced, bearing the burden of a steaming cup of black coffee. It's meant to be a peace offering. Will keeps his hands folded on the table and says nothing as she sits down across from him. He doesn't reach for it, though he's cold enough that he's sure his teeth would chatter if he opened his mouth.

"Come on, Will," she says softly, gently. "It's been hours. You posted that article and drove him underground, but you also outed him to the world. You made him public enemy number one, but now he knows we're closing in—what were you hoping to achieve?"

He stares at her. What does *she* hope to achieve? A solid contribution toward the closing of this case, and a feather in her metaphorical cap as an FBI trainee? He won't give her the satisfaction. He won't give it to *any* of them.

What did *he* hope to achieve? To raise the red flag, for one—and to paint a target on Abel Gideon's back that will be impossible to erase. And from here, his primary goal is to wriggle out of this mess in a way that will cause the least amount of lasting damage.

He should call Margot, but he can't connect himself to her when everything is so tentative. One option down.

He should call Hannibal. Tell him where he is, and hope that he'll get him out. And though it looms an imposing inevitability that Hannibal will find out exactly where he is, Will doesn't want to involve him until it's strictly necessary. As long as he can get it, he needs his rest.

That leaves one option.

When Will finally breaks, his voice is plagued by suppressed shivers, frosty with disuse and disdain. They are the first and only words he'll speak. "There's a business card hidden under my phone case." He lowers his eyes to the table. Closes them. "For James Deioss. He's a lawyer. You call him, or let me call him, I don't care. I have a constitutional right to legal representation. I invoke my right to remain silent until I've consulted with my legal counsel."

"Will," she replies emphatically. "You can help us. You're the *only* one who can help us."

He says nothing. Maintains his silence, until the undeniable chill of his refusal forces Miriam from the room and leaves him alone once more. The shiver building at the nape of his neck is nearly unbearable, but not nearly so keen as the ache centered in his chest.

If Hannibal ever expected to see Quantico, it certainly wouldn't have been his prediction that he'd be invited in as an asset and a guest. It's a strange thing, and might have been a heady victory if it had come under different circumstances.

As it is, it's hard to feel particularly victorious about anything surrounding this situation.

"My office," Jack says, and holds the door open. "I'll brief you on the case so far."

Hannibal does not cross the threshold. "Jack, I appreciate your professionalism, but it was my understanding that I'm here to talk to Will."

"I'm afraid I can't let you see him yet." Crawford gestures with his chin for Hannibal to enter. There's few things he wants *less* right now, but he won't get in their good graces by denying their requests. Nor, he thinks, would it help Will's… predicament.

So enter he does. "Then why have you brought me here?"

"Well." The room is little more than a glorified cubicle, no windows to speak of, just a desk and foam-square walls. On them are photos, tacked up and strung together with what looks like yarn. A non-linear display of the Ripper's kills, branching off in directions based solely on trains of thought. "In truth, it's less about you talking to him, and more about… if he's willing to talk, what he'll get in return."

Hannibal stops short before the office chair. He places his hands primly on the back of it, and does not allow his fingers to curl into claws, his knuckles to whiten. “You’re using my presence as a bartering chip. Will incriminates himself, and you allow him the comfort of seeing me before you confine him to a prison cell, is that it?”

“If he’s innocent, there should be nothing for him to incriminate himself with,” Jack bites back.

Hannibal cooly arches a brow. The creature inside him paces uneasily, knowing Will is so close. The *answers* are so close. “It seems you’ve already decided he’s guilty, if you’ve arrested him for accessory to murder—and it seems like you have your eye on more severe charges. I know how the legal process works. Anything you get from him from here on out is merely evidence to build your case. If that’s your angle, I’m afraid that I cannot blame Will for maintaining his silence.”

Jack sits heavily in his chair, brows drawn together. He folds his hands in his lap and taps his index fingers together; seems to consider something, before he says, “My priority is catching Abel Gideon. Finding out how much Will knew about these murders before they happened is also high on my priority list.” Jack exhales slowly through his nose. He looks at Hannibal as one might look at someone who they privately believe to be very foolish. “You don’t owe him your loyalty, Hannibal. It’s clear he holds little for you, if any at all.”

“Forgive me, Jack, but until Will gives me reason to believe otherwise, I must believe you’re mistaken.” The words taste acrid on his tongue. No, he cannot believe Will would be able to carry out having an affair without him knowing—logically, or emotionally.

Hannibal’s eyes drift to the photos of the crime scenes. Most of the notes bear Jack’s blocky handwriting. Some, though, hold a familiar scrawling script that makes Hannibal’s teeth click together with the urge to bite back a growl. He prowls to the wall and takes in the words, and feels each like a blow, a yawning void opening up to howl.

Shallow. Materialistic. Represents ephemeral feeling, unintentionally revealing of temporary attachment. Objectifying, dehumanizing. Narcissistic personality disorder. Psychopathy. Incapable of genuine emotion.

Will has been here before. Many times, it seems—not just for the matter of Freddie Lounds. And maybe he is more adept at keeping secrets than previously believed.

Hannibal swallows tightly; anger comes first, followed quickly by denial, dismissal. No, there must be an explanation, Hannibal simply has to unearth it. Perhaps the answer can be found in the notes made in Will’s handwriting, the cutting and more importantly *inaccurate* observations. Inaccuracy is unlike Will, especially when it comes to the Ripper. There *has* to be a reason. He cannot imagine his intentions were interpreted through such a cruel lens when Will wrote such heartfelt messages in return—

Unless Jack knows about the messages, and that is his basis for the accusation of an affair, simply with the wrong target.

Hannibal’s teeth click together. He wants to ask, to chase the answers like vermin from their holes to be run down by hounds and crushed between their teeth. But then a different set of notes catch his eye. There, higher up the board, closer to the older kills, are post-its in the same handwriting that bear different implications.

Committed. Driven. Singularly focused. Perfectionist, type-A personality. Highly-specialized knowledge base. Genius-level intellect. Masterful compartmentalization. Sharply-honed instincts. A

predator in his prime. Judge, jury, and executioner.

Hannibal narrowly avoids reaching out to touch, to brush his fingers over colored paper and ink already smudged by the haste with which Will wrote these notes. He tucks his hands into his pockets to give them a different tactile sensation to focus on.

So. Somewhere along the line, either Will's affection had soured, or…

Or. Hannibal looks more closely at the placement of the post-its; scattered among the first body drops, up through the display of Andrew Caldwell, the Hanged Man's body on the Beltway, the Ace of Wands tableau in the National Press Club, followed by—

The Ten of Pentacles, placed at the Baltimore Botanical Gardens. The first tender, hidden missive Will concealed among his source code, and the place where his observations for Jack began to grow distant and cold. Either that was the time that Will made the decision to choose Hannibal as a man above all, and betrayed his infatuation with the Ripper in the name of keeping him safe, or… or what?

Hannibal turns away from the board and crosses the office in three brusque strides. He sits across from Jack. "How did this begin?"

Jack brushes his knuckle across the desk. Knocks twice, thoughtful. "I don't suppose you've heard of the website *Abnormal Analysis?"*

To lie, or not to lie? Surely they cannot prove Hannibal has any knowledge of Will's hobbies, or this meeting would be far less friendly. But given how frequently Will's site has been the topic of the news… "I've heard of the site, yes." He gives it a moment, allows his brow to furrow, and Jack's steely stare to sink in. He sits back in his chair at once, as though taken off-guard. "You suspect Will is involved?"

"I know he is. Will is the creator." Jack presses his lips together firmly; exhales through his nose. "After I caught Freddie Lounds for her breach of Johns Hopkins data security, she pointed me at Will. Purely out of spite, I'm sure, but she had some credible accusations. We looked into it, and I looked into Will. He agreed to help the investigation."

Hannibal rubs a hand over his mouth. It's only half an act. "When was this?"

"Just after the body at the National Press Club," Jack confirms. "Mid-November, before the Symphony Gala."

Hannibal exhales slowly. The truth is a blow, and yet it lines up. The Ripper was a creature that held Will's awe until one notable turning point—when he began working with Jack Crawford. "That long."

"Yes." Jack, to his credit, does look somewhat apologetic. He is reading Hannibal's aura of distress, despite his carefully-curated physical responses. It's to Hannibal's benefit that Jack has no context other than the obvious motivations for the source of that distress. "It wasn't my decision to keep this from you, Hannibal. In fact, I advised Will against it. But he was adamant that the less you knew, the better."

Yes, Will has always been unfortunately dedicated to staying self-sufficient.

"That sounds like him," Hannibal murmurs; Jack's expression is one bordering on pity. Hannibal turns his attention away from it, if only to suppress the desire to rip it from his face. He clears his throat, but the only other thing that comes to mind is… no more comforting. The words that cross his tongue

are sour, and cling to his mouth long after they've left it. "You said you believe Abel Gideon is the Chesapeake Ripper. How did Will react when you confided this information in him?"

A flicker upon Jack's brow, a shadow. He leans back in his chair, and glances up to the photos on the wall. Back to Hannibal. "Will came to us with the Ripper's identity."

For a moment, he does not move. Then, slowly, Hannibal blinks. "You've built your case on information Will brought to you, and now you've arrested him for it?"

Jack opens his mouth and swiftly closes it with an agitated click of his teeth. "It's not as simple as you make it sound."

"Is it not? You've come to me and sought to turn me against my partner who, from what I understand, has done more for your investigation as a civilian than your entire force has been capable of."

"You're right," Jack says. His eyes are dark. "But this killer didn't care about us, he cared about Will. It was Will's idea to make use of the Ripper's fascination with his crime scene analysis. To make the Ripper think Will was receptive to his advances, and lure him into the open so we could set up a sting."

It's a terrible feeling, this betrayal. Will's idea, all of it—despite the messages, despite the secrets they shared. Even if Hannibal knew that Will was siding with him as a person, he had thought there was *some* thread of loyalty to the Ripper and his art. The thought that Will had seen his attraction, used it as a lure….

Hannibal's fingers curl; his jaw clenches. "If you had evidence the Ripper was Abel Gideon, you've had ample time to take him into custody."

"He doesn't *leave* evidence." Jack exhales. His expression is stone. "Will's plan was to gain his favor, ask him to commit a murder, and catch him in the act. And now seven people are dead, including Abel Gideon's wife, his wife's family, and Mason Verger, who engaged in an altercation with Doctor Gideon just over a week ago that involved Will Graham—and now Will won't tell us anything, including where he was last night. You have to admit, Hannibal, the odds of this being a coincidence are not in Will's favor."

Hannibal is silent as he absorbs this. But Jack is unrelenting, pushing his patience to the breaking point.

"You want to know what I think? *I* think that Will was sympathetic from the beginning. His intentions started out good, but somewhere along the line, he decided to abandon whatever sense of morality he had in the beginning. I think he and Abel Gideon conspired to kill his wife *and* Mason Verger, and run away together. I think this was all planned, and Will played us all for fools. You and me both. And—"

"Jack," Hannibal says softly, and the man goes finally, blessedly quiet. "That's enough. This has gone on long enough. I am being fed one side of a story that I simply…"

Hannibal's mouth is dry. He swallows, and it's primarily performative, but not entirely. It would be a splendid story, a news feature for the ages—but only if it's true. And it cannot be true.

Because Abel Gideon is not the Chesapeake Ripper, never has been, and never will be.

"I cannot allow myself to believe right now. I understand if I'm not allowed to speak to Will at this time, but I want to see him. Any additional questions you have for me, you can ask me in the

observation room."

Jack's lips press together. He stares at Hannibal, a silent battle of wills, and Hannibal stares back. He refuses to lose.

Whatever has happened, he will read the truth of it from Will's face. If Will has betrayed him in heart and mind, he will see it, and he will know.

And then, with a heavy sigh, Jack stands. "Very well," he says. "Follow me."

The interrogation rooms are located at the center of Quantico, deep within the bowels of the institution, where the winding halls and passages are least welcoming and most secure. It's cold down here, Hannibal notices, though not so much that their breaths condense, but enough that it skitters electric nerve impulses over his skin. He casually shrugs his coat on. Jack's eyes linger on the motion, but he does not comment as he reaches for a door and holds it open for Hannibal to pass.

"I'll ask you not to touch anything," Jack says. "The questioning is in progress. You shouldn't be in here at all, so mind your hands and don't touch any of the switches. No interruptions."

Hannibal inclines his head—but at that moment, he sees through the business end of the two-way viewing window, and all thoughts of words leave him.

Will's hair is short. This time, the change is genuine; it falls barely past his jaw, brushing the nape of his neck. It's not so different from last night as to be noticeable, but Hannibal knows. That hair slipped through his fingers only last night, spilling around their faces, their bodies. It certainly won't be able to do that again, not as it is now.

And the length does nothing to cover the thin slice along Will's throat, so thin that it could be a shaving cut. It does nothing to shield him from the stubble that's just barely growing in, but without a doubt casts him in a more masculine light. It does nothing to hide the dark circles under Will's eyes, faint lavender in color from a long night without rest, though one certainly wouldn't know it from the sharp light in his irises, concealed behind a flat expression. And it does nothing to hold in his heat; Will's arms are pebbled with gooseflesh where the sleeves of the white tee-shirt do not cover, shivers wracking his body at the side of James Deioss. Presumably, it is the lawyer's blazer so genteelly offered that Will holds around his shoulders. His fingers are pale, shaking; whether it's due to the cold, or due to the tight grip of the handcuffs around his wrists, Hannibal cannot be sure.

Kindly put, Will is a mess. Not in a way that others may be able to qualify, but to Hannibal, who knows Will inside and out, whose body still twinges with the memory of his touch and his warmth, it's obvious.

Yes, something certainly happened last night. But what, exactly, and why—those are the questions Hannibal must answer on his own, preferably far away from the scheming clutches of the FBI that would steal Will from him forever.

No. Will is his, to have and to hold, and to punish as he sees fit, if the matter calls for such a thing. Perhaps it does, but that is only for Hannibal to decide.

Seated beside Will, James Deioss is a rock in his button-down and waistcoat, sleeves rolled up as though the cold cannot touch him. To their credit, it does provide a sympathetic image—a shivering young thing and his stalwart protector, the agent of justice there to right the wrongful accusations being hurled at them. Across the stainless table is a blonde woman in a black coat that is blazoned with the words *FBI Training Academy, Quantico.* It's curious that Jack would select an agent in training to interrogate Will for what he said was his *first priority.* Why not allow a fully-seasoned agent to do the questioning? Surely it'll only give James more ammunition for Will's inevitable defense—

"Will," she says, and there's an exasperated, irritated edge to her voice. "I can't help you if you don't let me."

"Officer Lass, with all due respect—and I do mean all *due* respect, since your officially-granted legal jurisdiction does not extend past Maryland state lines—my client has made it exceedingly clear that they have no desire to answer any questions at this time. It's a constitutional right to remain silent, not an optional one."

Officer Lass' eyes flash. They're a piercing shade of blue. "We're trying to catch a killer. Will can help us."

"I don't see what incentive they'd have to help you, considering the state in which this room is kept. It's cold, inhospitable, my client has been denied access to food, water, and the restroom—"

She sits up straight. "Will can ask for those things himself if he needs them."

"Basic human dignity should not be contingent upon a client's ability to ask. They should be considered the standard of humane practices by law enforcement."

At Hannibal's side, Jack exhales forcefully through his nose. He sounds like a teacher dealing with unruly children. Hannibal wonders if he even has the decency to feel embarrassed that his trainee is so casually dismissing Will's human rights before his life partner. Jack shared their table last night, their food, their hospitality. This is how he's seen fit to repay Will, suspicions or not? They have no *proof.*

A buzz—Jack glances down at a phone he takes from his pocket and quietly curses. His finger touches a button. "Miriam, pull back."

There's no indication that Will or James heard Jack's words, so it must connect to an earpiece she wears. All the same, she sighs heavily, slumps in her chair, and says, "Let me see what I can do," like she's trying to do them a favor.

It's remarkably underhanded. Fortunately, neither Deioss or Will seem to have any faith that she's being genuine. They watch as she stands, as she retreats, and then look at each other. When the door opens and closes and shepherds her out, Hannibal continues to watch them. Watches as Will's eyes flutter closed and he exhales silently. Watches as Deioss reaches over and gently pats his back and says, "It's gonna be alright, kid."

Watches when Will's eyes open again with the steely stillness of one who is in it for the long haul, and knows precisely what he's in for. He nods, just once. Says nothing.

Hannibal's eyes don't leave his profile until the moment the other door swings open and the female officer comes through from a short access hallway, likely so whoever they are interrogating has no concept of how many people are observing. Smart, that—though Hannibal cannot help but wonder

how Will's demeanor might change if he knew that Hannibal stands just on the other side of the glass. The glimpse of a sleeve, a half-captured scent. So many things that could give it away.

But observing Will without him knowing is a rare thing. Observing while he's under stress, rarer yet.

Hannibal turns his eyes to the woman, and she freezes when she sees another presence other than Jack. Glances between them. Realizes. Deflates. "You must be Doctor Lecter," she says before Jack can make the introduction, and shuts the door behind her. "I didn't think I'd ever meet you, and if I did, this is definitely not how I wanted to do it." She sighs; holds out her hand. "Miriam Lass."

Hannibal inclines his head. "You know of me?"

She answers with a small, tight smile. The lines around her eyes are as sad as they are stressed. "I worked with Will. Of course I know about you."

It's a small thing, but Hannibal's ego soothes at it. He shakes her hand. "I wish we were meeting under better circumstances."

She nods back. Then she turns her attention to Jack, and their hands drop. "Agent Crawford, it really is damn cold in there. Do I have your permission to adjust the thermostat?"

Clever girl, to ask in front of Hannibal. Jack cannot easily deny her now without looking unnecessarily cruel; his eyes dart between them as he evidently realizes the same. He sighs hard, unhappy. "No more than five degrees. We're on federal funding, Lass."

"Got it." She ducks back into the access hall, if only for a moment, and then she is on her way out.

Hannibal's attention returns to Will—his eyes are distant, not quite focused, but not in a way that renders him entirely absent. James does nothing to try to speak to him; perhaps he's already learned Will doesn't want to speak.

The need to *know* digs its claws into Hannibal's ribs. He turns to Jack. Exhales slowly, and does all he can to maintain his calm. "What happened, Jack?"

Before them, on the wall with the two-way window, is an array of switches, but also a mounted shelf where a manila folder sits and waits. Jack rests his hand upon it. Doesn't open it. "A geocacher found Annalise Gideon's body this morning around four AM at Herald Harbor, north of Annapolis. As soon as she was identified, I put out an APB for Abel. Around that time, Maryland law enforcement received a call about a suspicious individual matching his description at the Potomac boat launch way up near Point of Rocks. When we got forensics out there, we recovered a white SUV with five bodies inside that we have yet to positively identify, but the car was registered to Ardelia and Charles Bainbridge: Annalise's parents." Jack huffs through his nose. For a moment, he closes his eyes and shakes his head. "I believe all the victims to be Annalise's immediate family. From there, I sent a team to the Gideon household, but found fire and rescue already there. It's my belief that Abel meant to torch the house in an attempt to destroy the scene. The fire was put out an hour ago, but we've found evidence of blood. A lot of it."

Sloppy. Untrained. Hannibal does not grimace, but it's a near thing. *This* is the man they want to assign his legacy? *This* is the man that Will believes is *capable* or the Ripper's artistry?

"Gideon's car was in the garage. The fuel tank was empty, so we got it mostly untouched—and found evidence tying Gideon to the scene of one of the earlier Ripper displays," Jack continues. Hannibal

tilts his head sharply. “Between that, the house, and the bodies we’ve recovered, it’s enough to damn Abel Gideon once we catch up to him. But.”

There’s always a *but.* Hannibal watches Jack, raptly focused as the man’s expression twists.

“While Abel Gideon was sighted, we have concluded that the time of death on Mason Verger aligns with that sighting—more than an hour away in Darlington. Meaning that Abel could not have acted alone. But according to the profile, the Ripper *only* works alone. Or, he *did.* And that brings us back to Will.”

It was no great secret, the hatred Will held for Mason Verger. Truly, even for Annalise—but if Hannibal had to guess which Will was more likely to be responsible for, he’d bet squarely on Mason. He might even be proud, if this situation were not such a terrible mess.

Hannibal presses his tongue against the inside of his teeth. The points of them feel sharp. “You arrested Will at the scene?”

“No.”

It’s a short, irritable reply. Jack’s hand curls into a fist atop the folder; Hannibal looks up, and through the window, Will’s expression is still smooth and even. He cannot hear them, Hannibal knows, but it feels somehow wrong to see him there so unmoving, unable to defend himself against these accusations. Hannibal wonders what Will *would* say to defend himself, if Jack leveled this information at him directly. If he would speak at all. If the lines of his face would change when he saw Hannibal seated across from him, the patient ear waiting for answers.

Patient for Will, anyway. For Jack Crawford, Hannibal is starting to lose that patience.

“Then I must assume you found some forensic evidence of Will’s involvement at any of the scenes you mentioned.”

Jack’s jaw bulges. His cheeks flush, despite the chill in the room.

Hannibal raises a brow. “Witnesses against him, a sworn testimony? Do you have any evidence whatsoever that Will met with Abel Gideon tonight?

He says nothing.

And for the first time, Hannibal feels the stirrings of an emotion that could almost be called positive. Perhaps even hopeful. “Then forgive me, Jack, but I don’t understand what grounds you had to arrest him. Accessory to murder without evidence will surely not hold up in court.”

Jack bares his teeth and rounds on Hannibal, furious. “They’ve been meeting each other. They’ve communicated somehow—I’m waiting on phone records, text logs, everything. If Will told Abel to kill his wife, Mason Verger, and all those people, then I have *every* right. Inciting violence is not protected under free speech. He’d have the same responsibility for the crime as any person who’s ever hired a hit man.”

“Jack,” Hannibal replies slowly, and holds a hand out, soothing, palm-down. He can barely contain the bubbling within his throat, the slow fizz of intrigue. “I regard you as a friend. A true one.” A stretch, true, but he likes Jack Crawford well enough. He’s certainly been useful. Hannibal plasters on his most conflicted countenance, projecting his unease and his hope in equal measures. “I have enormous respect for the law; I myself am sworn to do no harm. I just… want to be sure, if this is the

accusation that you are making, that it's true. I wouldn't want either Will *or* you to face a consequence you do not deserve—"

Behind them, the observation room door opens. This time, it is not Miriam Lass who enters.

Kade Prurnell's eyes are cutting as they slide from Hannibal to Jack. Accusing. Jack does not shrink under her gaze, but it's a near thing. "What have we learned?"

Jack shakes his head, grimaces. "Graham won't talk."

Her lip curls. It's a sneer full of white teeth and nude lipstick, her black pantsuit worn with all the prim formality of the Grim Reaper arrived upon a doorstep to collect her due. She does not seem pleased to have been denied. "I needed to know where Abel Gideon went as of six *hours* ago, Crawford. Six *hours* the Chesapeake Ripper has been in the wind, and the whole world *knows* about it, because of the person in that office that you *invited* into my investigation without authorization. I cannot even *begin* to express the content of the report I will be writing." Her eyes narrow. "And every minute this goes on looks worse for both of us. If he won't talk, get in there and *make* him. Use any and all ammunition you have. I want it done."

Jack inhales. He does not exhale. He glances to Hannibal, clearly doing his best to crush his humiliation at being dressed-down before another. Inclines his head in what might be considered something just shy of a bow.

He leaves the folder. Picks up an earpiece. Turns on his heel. Enters the access hall.

Kade Prurnell takes her place at the observation window. She stands at Hannibal's side, and her expression is tight and tense. "Doctor Lecter, not to be unkind, but composed as you are, you have the look of a man who's having a catastrophically unpleasant Christmas Eve morning."

"I believe we may have that in common," Hannibal replies, voice even until the very end; he swallows, and Kade's attention slides to him. Yes, let her think him vulnerable, trustworthy. Shaken and full of doubts.

His eyes fall to the folder on the table before them. It's not his place to reach for it, and in this room, he must be on his most mindful behavior. Even predators can be taken down by pests, if the hive is disturbed. He must tread carefully.

He lowers his voice. Glances up, through the window as Jack enters the interrogation room, and Will's head lifts. Asks quietly, "Agent Prurnell, I'm well aware of where we are and the impeccable reputation of your institution, but I must ask. Are you sure about Will?"

Her lips thin. She, too, looks through the window. She asks, "Are you?"

Hannibal does not know the answer. It was not so very long ago that he was sure he did.

Jack sits at the table across from Will. He carries nothing with him. He sits, and for a while, he simply stares.

Will meets his gaze head-on. His expression doesn't change. He doesn't shift, no longer shivers. Nothing.

And Hannibal, too, stares.

The silence stretches for a time. Jack places his hands atop the table, fingers linked together. His wedding band *clicks* against the metal. Will's eyes drop to it, and back up, though his posture doesn't change.

At his side, Deioss' face is unchanging. Unrelenting.

And then Jack speaks. "Abel should have done a better job sinking the car. And burning the house, for that matter." Jack's eyes shine with suspicion, flash with irritation. He's seasoned, but his emotions are read clearly in his eyes.

Will, however—Will is a blank slate. He doesn't blink. Doesn't move. His breath comes evenly.

Deioss glances at his client, and back to Jack Crawford. "In case you weren't made aware by the person before you, my client has plead the Fifth Amendment, invoking their right to silence in the absence of appropriately private consultation."

Jack ignores him. "We have the bodies, Will. All of them. Annalise, Mason, all the others. Seven people dead, and we have you as accessory to all of them. That's a maximum of fifteen years per count—how many years is that?" He raises a brow. "One hundred and five? I dunno, do you figure you have another hundred and five years? Modern medicine is a marvel, but I think that's a stretch."

There is no arched brow, no casual shrug. There is no curling lip, no resentful snarl. No preening, no taunting. No lashing out, no defensiveness. No reaction, none, even when faced with an unpleasant truth. One that, if Will were involved, Hannibal would expect *some* response.

But Will's back is straight. His chin is raised, though not in defiance, but cool observation. James Deioss' suit jacket hangs around Will's shoulders, but Will no longer clings to it. Like Crawford, he laces his fingers atop the table, though the metal must be cold. He's mimicking—

No, Hannibal realizes, *he's empathizing. But not with Jack.*

It's not Will he sees when he looks into this room. It's not even the posture of his wild beloved. This is seamless composure. This is a body and mind under the perfect command of the one who lives inside it.

Jack's eyes narrow when Will doesn't respond. He leans forward abruptly, but Will doesn't lean back. "You don't even have anything to say in your own defense?"

In truth, it's smarter for him not to. In court, the defense is entitled to any evidence the prosecution submits, but the same is not true in reverse. All the better if the prosecution has no prior knowledge of the angle the defense will play. It's much harder to refute that way.

"You want to know what I think?" Crawford asks. At Hannibal's side, Kade Prurnell shifts, and sets her eyes on Will. Watches him like a hawk. "I think you used the FBI's resources, not to help us, but to find Gideon before we did. And meanwhile, you gave me *just* enough to keep us interested, but never enough to close in on him. You tracked down Abel Gideon once you had more access, and that's when you got what you wanted all along. Hell, you were the first one who identified the Chesapeake Ripper. You named him. You know him better than anyone. You know exactly what he wants, you know how he operates. You majored in forensics, you have working knowledge of the law. Maybe you thought you could get away with all of this. So you found him and seduced him and made a plan to take out the threat."

You were the first one who identified the Chesapeake Ripper.

Something in those words strikes Hannibal squarely in the chest. It swirls within him, a vortex, a whirlpool, water circling a drain and dragging all else to the depths.

You named him.

"Abel killed his wife and her whole family at your behest, but what did you have to contribute?"

You know him better than anyone.

"Mason Verger attacked you, threatened retaliation against both of you, Gideon most of all. You killed him to prove yourself in return."

You know exactly what he wants, you know how he operates.

"I'm sure we'll find DNA evidence. There's always something to find at a scene like that. Maybe you even helped Gideon with his family—the Ripper's not a sloppy guy, after all, but you're new at this."

You majored in forensics, you have working knowledge of the law.

"But you know what surprised me most of all?"

Maybe you thought you could get away with all of this.

"It's not even the fact that, when all was said and done, when the tables turned, you turned on him…"

So you found him and seduced him and made a plan to take out the threat.

"…it's the fact that you didn't turn on Hannibal. I went there expecting a bloodbath; I found him in a bathrobe. And if Gideon didn't get to him before we did, it's because he didn't know."

Silence.

In that silence, the beating of a heart. Hannibal's pulse thrums in his ears.

Jack sits still, expectant.

A muscle in Will's jaw bulges as his teeth press together, hidden behind closed lips.

And Jack says, quietly, "How many times did you tell me that everything you were doing was to keep him safe? You didn't post that article just to cause a shitstorm. You made the public aware of the Chesapeake Ripper's identity so everyone would be on the lookout—but you did it to save Hannibal's life."

Will swallows. Just once. He doesn't look away from Jack as he opens his mouth—

"Will," James Deioss says firmly. "Don't."

—and closes it again.

"Agent Crawford," James continues. Inhales. Exhales. "Based on your own admission that you found Doctor Lecter alive and well, one might assume you took him into protective custody. One might also assume that, given the delicate nature of this case, the safest place for Doctor Lecter was here at Quantico. Operating under that assumption, given that you've taken Will into custody, you would want any insight into their character that you were able to surmise from any source. Would you say those are accurate assumptions?"

Jack raises a brow. “You know what they say about assumptions, Mr. Deioss.”

“I’d prefer to make an ass of myself as opposed to my client, given that Will has much more at stake here, don’t you agree?” James replies smoothly. “Including the future of their personal relationship, if Doctor Lecter is currently observing this interrogation session, as I must assume he is.”

Will’s nostrils flare on a quiet exhale. There is a flicker of light in his eyes that is swiftly hidden as his eyelids close, shuttering his soul from sight. But Hannibal saw it all the same, just as he sees it in the quiver of Will’s lower lip that just as suddenly goes still, bitten from the inside.

Not the guilt of a person caught in their transgressions—but the despair of a broken heart who had dared to hope, and now sees defeat.

He knows.

When?

Where?

How?

It doesn’t matter. He knows.

Hannibal’s mind races, and he, too, swallows hard. The sound of his own heartbeat drowns out the sound of his breath, the crackle of static from a silent room.

Will knows. Of course he knows.

Will, who named him.

Will, who knows the Ripper better than anyone.

Will, who Hannibal doubted. Even if he never condemned him in so many words, Hannibal doubted just the same.

Will, Hannibal realizes with sudden and terrible clarity, who knew this might happen. Who turned suspicion so far away from Hannibal, that while Will is inside the interrogation room, Hannibal is outside it. Who laid his hand upon Hannibal’s just last night and said *I think we should buy the return tickets once we get there.*

Will, who has given him this opportunity to cut and run—and from the look on his face behind that two-way mirror, fears that he may do so. Take this chance and turn his back, leave Will to face the consequences of his recklessness alone. Maybe the lawyer will get him out of this mess without charges, maybe he won’t. But that is the choice Will has made, the contingency plan he has laid: to offer Hannibal the metaphorical lifeline instead of grabbing it for himself.

Will, who caused this mess. Who spared him from it. Who figured out the riddles and kept his cool, worked with Jack Crawford in the public eye and wrote secret messages in the source code of his website. Who has somehow framed a surrogate beyond the shadow of a doubt.

Who shared Hannibal’s home, his hearth, his table. Who ran at his side. Hunted with him, shared the triumph with him. Who ate the heart of a beast as it cooled in his palm.

Who knowingly ate the heart of a man, gifted to him by a killer.

Who wears the damning brand of Hannibal's teeth in his neck, not in spite of Hannibal being the Chesapeake Ripper, but *because* of it. Who claimed Hannibal with his fangs, until death do they part.

Who already knows his secrets and agreed to marry him.

Who loves him selfishly; loves him selflessly.

Who Hannibal loves with every ruthless and terrible thing that he is.

"Agent Prurnell," Hannibal says softly. He licks his lips, reaches out—stops short. Rests his fingertips on the shelf before him, just shy of the folder, and keeps his head lowered. Inside him, something howls. "If I may, I… I need to know what you believe Will to be a part of. If that's not too much to ask."

She looks at him, sidelong. Then, "Permission granted."

His fingers do not shake when Hannibal pulls the folder close, when he flips it open; it's a near thing he narrowly avoids. But his breath does leave him all at once at the first glossy, high-definition photograph—

It is not the Ripper's work, but it could have been.

She faces the rising sun, bathed in the blood red of a dawning winter sky. Hannibal had never seen her hair flow long and loose around her in life; in death, she's made more beautiful. Arms suspended to hold two chalices, full of blood and water. A white robe, immaculate, split at the collar, draped artfully around her legs. Her breasts, her chest, her innards, all carved away and filled with branches of holly. An empty nest in the cradle of her pelvis.

She is Temperance. So, too, does Will beg temperance. The eagle flies free; perhaps more a phoenix than any simple bird of prey.

The second photo: the inside of a house, drenched with so much blackening blood that Hannibal can practically smell it. Dead blood. The capsaicin smell of rage, the sour-bitter notes of fear. The third is of a kitchen, standing pools congealing on tile.

The fourth is of the inside of a sedan's trunk—the spare tire compartment unearthed, and an evidence marker beside it, denoting a—

A set of license plates. Plates that, as far as Hannibal knew before this moment, were safely concealed within his basement. Or so he believed.

Hannibal bites back a flicker of alarm, a flicker of rage; Jack has no physical evidence, he said so himself. Will must have been careful, or this situation would be much more complicated already. He is quick to flip to the next photograph, in search of something that would mean more to any other rational person—

A large SUV spilling water onto a boat launch, hauled up by the heavy mast of an industrial tow truck. Inside, five pale and waterlogged corpses, but not submerged for long enough to wash the blood from their clothes. An elderly couple, a middle aged couple.

And a child.

Hannibal pauses on that one. Observes. Absorbs. Inhales. Exhales.

The Chesapeake Ripper's legacy was misinterpreted due to the Beltway accident, he knows this much. But to imagine it tarnished due to the deliberate butchery of a child, who for all her small stature surely could not be above the age of ten…

He turns the photo over and progresses to the next. Is filled with a sensation that nearly cancels out the first. Not quite. But close.

The dirt floor of the barn is stained with a puddle of blood, eclipsed by shadow. Above it, the pink and fleshy body of a swine is tied together at the ankles with common, heavy-grade polyester rope. A meathook is speared just behind both Achilles tendons, suspending his body upside-down. As any swine is butchered, his throat has been slit to bleed him appropriately. As one does, he is also castrated, sliced from pelvis to sternum. Beneath his body is a trough full of half-eaten organs, crowded on either side by sows whose backs bear deep, angry-red scars. His limbs, too, are nearly stripped of flesh as high as the sows could reach.

It is Mason Verger—or what is left of him—butchered and field-dressed exactly as Will and Hannibal had stripped the doe of her meat. This was a message and a transformation, too, but one of an entirely different sort.

Hannibal licks his lips. Abruptly, he finds his mouth to be dry.

He exhales through his nose. Closes the folder. "I… have recently applied through Johns Hopkins to change my residency from surgery to psychiatry. As a professional with experience in both, would you accept my insights as a civilian, if I were to offer them?"

"Doctor Lecter, I'm willing to accept any information that may get us closer to solving these murders and locating Abel Gideon," Kade replies simply. "We'll call it a consultation."

"Very well," Hannibal answers, and opens the folder again. He spreads the photographs out side-by-side. Touches the first, the visage of Temperance. "I'm no study of tarot, I'm afraid," he lies, "but there are several elements, here. This body holds an enormous degree of care and planning compared to the others. To me, this reads clearly as the Ripper's work—but also, a victim that he was uncharacteristically tender in dealing with. Protecting her modesty with the robe, the empty nest, the cups nearly overflowing, the way she is facing the sun, the way the light falls: there are elements of care, here. This was a brutal killing, but he truly believes he has elevated her. I would say with confidence, knowing what I know, that Annalise Gideon was most certainly killed and arranged by her husband, which would confirm his identity as the Chesapeake Ripper."

It's not surprising, of course, but Kade Prurnell nods sharply in agreement. She exhales softly, as though almost relieved that they have at least *that* much to go off of. "The house, and the family?"

Hannibal touches each of the next three—hallway, kitchen, vehicle. "This screams to me of rage. The Ripper is a brutally efficient killer. Last night, Abel did strike me as… off, somehow. With everything going on with the holidays, with the altercation and the lawsuit and his subsequent suspension…." Hannibal presses his lips together. He allows his eyes to linger on the family. On the child. "This killer has always acted as the pinnacle of control, but surely everyone must have their breaking point. He is a perfectionist under a great deal of strain, his life and career falling to pieces around him, suddenly finding himself with a house full of company—and, indeed, the chaos a child can bring. Those with that type of personality are rarely men who deal well with unexpected elements outside of their control. It is… likely that the presence of this child, raised voices, perhaps a tantrum, was enough to set him off and cause him to snap. Notice the bloodstains: a slit throat, likely to quiet her. The rest, a reaction to the immediate fallout. Everything from there, instinct. In my opinion, there is

no way that this was planned. The presence of the additional family may have even come as a surprise, or I'm sure he would have taken measures to distance himself somehow."

"You're saying he snapped?" At that, Kade frowns deeply. She stares at the photographs, unblinking, her glacial eyes glittering like ice and glass. "That would throw a wrench in Jack's theory of this being planned."

"I in no way mean to undermine Agent Crawford," Hannibal assures her quietly. "This is merely my opinion. I am not a professional, but I consider myself to know Doctor Gideon quite well." Exaggeration, of course, but the history is there to support his claim. "Doctor Gideon has expressed his distaste regarding children before. Add this on top of the variety of other stressors, I think it's feasible that he may have experienced an episode of hysterical psychosis. Combine that with his… unsavory hobbies, and his medical expertise—"

"Cue family annihilation," she mutters grimly. Nods once. "Which would explain why it's so different from his past kills. But his wife—"

"He must've been planning to kill her well in advance," Hannibal admits. "Or, at that point, she may have already been dead. It's hard to know, but it would make sense of the discrepancy of a hasty disposal—" he points at the car, and then back to Annalise, "—versus his usual displays. He may have used the SUV to transport Annalise's body to the location where he placed her, then sank the car to dispose of the rest, as well as the evidence. It's winter; with the ice flows and the currents, it's likely the car would have been moved to deeper waters by the time the boat launch was back in service. Being spotted is uncharacteristic, but who can be certain of his mental state? That could also be why he was not as thorough in setting the house on fire as he intended to be. It was certainly not what he had planned, or he would have had more fuel on hand." Hannibal taps the picture of the license plate. "And, assuming this is the evidence Jack mentioned, he would have been much more careful about its providence."

"May or may not be functioning at full capacity. That should make him easier to find."

"It's likely he had a plan in place considering the eventuality that he was caught. However, he's likely not executing it as effectively as he normally would, especially considering that everyone in the public sphere will recognize his face by the end of the day. I would expect him to be on the move out of the area as quickly as possible, likely attempting to disguise himself. Expect bottle-dye, sunglasses, and a slew of stolen vehicles. With this scope of public attention, he'll be unable to make use of his identification, passport, or credit cards. He'll be driving, likely headed for the southern border. I would be surprised if he were not south of Virginia already."

Kade curses quietly, already reaching for the cell phone in her pocket. She's growling under her breath as she types out a message. Her eyes are off the photographs when she snarls, "And Verger?"

"Here, I may understand if you wish to take my advice with a grain of salt," Hannibal says, falsely cautious.

She hits send. Jams the phone in her pocket. Looks up impatiently. "Go on."

"Mason Verger is not a small man," Hannibal starts slowly. "Note the width of his shoulders, his substantial height. Genetics favored him in terms of size and strength. And he's known in certain circles for his violent temper. As Margot mentioned at dinner, he's often armed with a knife. And yet, there are almost no marks of violence on this body aside from his slit throat, this bruise that likely indicates a broken nose, and the way he was butchered."

“Meaning?” She asks. Now, she’s frowning more heavily; as Hannibal suspected, she does not like the implications of what she’s hearing. She’s about to like it even less.

“This was a swift attack. Mister Verger was clearly outmatched and overpowered—and if you see here, by the cascade of the intestines from the body, and how some threads are still attached, he was not gutted until after he was hoisted. And unless I’m missing a substantial angle on line of sight, I see no pully attached to this hook, meaning the hook was suspended from the ceiling as-is, and his body was *lifted* onto it.” Or the pully was removed and destroyed. However… “It’s my opinion that he was violently ambushed by two or more strong, capable individuals. His nose was broken, his throat slit. Rather impersonal, all-in-all. It seems very important to whoever this assailant was that Mason be given the pig’s experience.”

Hannibal presses his lips together, and heaves out a sigh.

“I know you may consider me to be biased, and I understand your concern. By all means, please have your techs go over the scene—but this simply doesn’t strike me as something Will would even be *capable* of on his own. He certainly doesn’t have the height or the strength. And, truth be told, the likelihood that Will could have gotten to the Verger Estate at all is almost impossible.”

“And why is that?” she asks sharply.

Hannibal averts his eyes. Again, he sighs, and feigns uneasy submission, reluctant defensiveness. Uncertainty. Hannibal’s body is the stage upon which this performance must be carried out, convincing from start to finish, woven equally with honesty and lies. “Will was in a car accident last week, during the snowstorm. It totaled his vehicle; we’ve not yet received the replacement options from the insurance company, so he’s been reliant on me for transportation ever since. And… he didn’t want to alarm anyone, so he asked me not to mention, but it seems relevant: Will was concussed in the crash. He’s been struggling with nausea and vertigo. Mentally, I cannot speak for his involvement with Abel Gideon, or what secrets he may be keeping. But physically, Agent Prurnell… I do truly believe he would be incapable of this.”

Her brows shoot up. “Why did you not inform us of this immediately?”

Hannibal’s teeth click together. “Forgive me, Agent, but Jack informed me that Will was suspected of accessory to murder. That, I cannot speak to. It’s clear that based on Will’s silence relating to this investigation in *any* capacity, I do not know him as well as I believed.” He closes the folder with steady hands. “But as a doctor, and as one involved in Will’s life, I can tell you that I *would* testify that, lack of transportation aside, he is not *physically* capable of the crime he’s being accused of.”

“Abel Gideon was sighted over an hour away at the time of Mason Verger’s death,” she snaps. “Are you suggesting he teleported?”

Hannibal’s brows inch up. He bites back his irritation. “I am not. Instead, I’m suggesting something entirely more outlandish and unlikely, but potentially true.”

She stares at him. A moment of silence—an impatient gesture. *“Well?”*

Takes a breath, and lets it out, as though he honestly cannot believe his own words. “I’m suggesting Mason may have been killed by another group of people entirely.”

“A coincidence.” She says it, voice flat, eyes incredulous. “You think the murder of Mason Verger may be a coincidence. Statistically, that is almost impossible.”

“Based upon the evidence you’ve presented me, it’s the only logical conclusion I can return,” Hannibal replies. “I do not work for the FBI. You’re under no obligation to believe me. But I would at least consider the possibility.”

Kade rubs a hand over her face. It drags slowly over her mouth, eyes closed. She does indeed look like she’s having a morning as eventful as Hannibal’s promises to be—especially if he should be able to enact the maneuver slowly forming within the corridors of his mind. Exponential complications, of course. But great risk brings a far greater potential reward.

“You said Will is concussed?” She looks exhausted. Irritated. *Deeply* irritated, though likely not with him.

“Yes.”

“And as a hospital surgeon, you’re able to write prescriptions,” she replies. Her eyes sharpen on him. “Would it not be a conflict of interest to treat a romantic partner?”

Oh? Hannibal blinks slowly. Considers the implications, weighs his options. She would not have raised the topic if it weren’t relevant.

He follows it through to the end. “Yes,” he says slowly, “it would, in theory. Though the practice is not uncommon among families, or even expressly forbidden, as long as it does not cross clear ethical boundaries. Prescribing medications at a Schedule III level or higher without outside consultation, for example.” His mind whirs. Fills in the blanks. “Most concussion-related medications fall firmly at a Schedule IV level or below.”

“So the prescription you wrote for lorazepam—”

Will Graham. Abysmally stupid, prismatically *brilliant* love of his life.

“Was for an exceedingly low dosage. Ativan, of which lorazepam is the generic version, is frequently used to combat nausea symptoms; it’s also used to treat anxiety and a host of other conditions.” Hannibal tucks his hands into his pockets. He frowns at her, and projects the demeanor of someone who is part scolding, part defensive. “I wrote the prescription just after Will was released with the express instructions that if he felt intolerably unwell, he should tell me, and I would bring him to get it filled at any time of day. The hospital pharmacy is twenty-four hours.” He blinks. Takes a breath, and with urgency, “If you know about the prescription—”

Her mouth thins into a grim line only defined by the color of her lipstick. “Agent Crawford apprehended Will this morning at Johns Hopkins.” From her pocket, she takes an orange vial and sets it on the table. “He was carrying these.”

Half-mil tablets of lorazepam, prescribed by Dr. Hannibal Lecter, bearing the instructions: *take one tablet by mouth as needed for concussion symptoms* .

You cunning, clever thing.

Hannibal picks them up; glances through the window with a manufactured sense of concern. A quiet noise slips between his teeth. “Will has been incredibly stubborn about not resorting to medication. If he left the house this morning to get them filled before I woke up…” Sucks in a breath. “I took his quiet for standoffishness, but maybe—do you know if he took a dose before he was put in this room?”

She blinks at him, eyes slowly widening with the sort of self-preserving concern that any bureaucrat with common sense possesses while in the midst of a crisis of their own making. “I don’t know.”

Hannibal closes his eyes. Shakes his head, just once, stern disappointment doing its very best to appear civil. “Will was apprehended with no evidence, denied medication despite an uncharacteristic lack of responsiveness, and held without access to the facilities as needed, while forced to endure conditions hostile to his depleted immune system—and this is meant to be justice?” His hand clenches around the bottle. Hannibal sets it down, and pins her in place with a glance. “Please make sure he gets a dose as soon as possible. Ideally with food; it can irritate the stomach. I don’t believe in denying medical aid to those in need, no matter what they may or may not have done. Anything you’ve denied Will that is his right to have, I’d be sure he gets it, for the sake of whatever case you’re building, if there is one. Private legal counsel, food, medication. The presumption is innocence until proven guilty.” His hand falls away. Hannibal lowers his eyes. “Though I’ll be the first to admit I’m not sure what has or hasn’t been proven. It’s clear I have a great deal to think about. I understand that I’m to stay in your custody, but surely that doesn’t mean I’m sequestered solely to Quantico?”

Kade lets out a long, low sigh. She picks up the bottle, tucks it into her palm, but does not immediately pocket it. It’s a good sign. “I can arrange for an agent to bring you to one of our temporary safehouses in the area. It won’t be anything as *comfortable* as your home, but it’ll be secure.”

Hannibal inclines his head. “I would appreciate that, thank you.” He looks up. Will is pale, withdrawn; he doesn’t speak. Jack appears to be speaking *to* him, but Will is either not focused, or ignoring him entirely. It does provide a certain credibility to his concussion defense. Perhaps Will really is too clever for his own good.

Hannibal fully intends to find out, but first things first. “Thank you, Agent Prurnell. I hope this is resolved as swiftly and painlessly as possible.”

She grimaces, turns her face away. “I envy your optimism. Thank you for your expertise, Doctor. I’ll be in touch when the situation is resolved, or when we have more information.”

Hannibal inclines his head. Then, allows his eyes to linger on Will. Takes in the fall of his hair, the exhaustion he wears in profile. And then, like he can sense the weight of Hannibal’s eyes, he turns to face the glass.

Will cannot see him, Hannibal knows. But it feels like being seen.

These next few days will be precarious, but I’ll do everything I can to throw the hounds off the scent. I knew this time would come. Have faith in me, like I believe in you.

Everything and more. It seems only right to return the favor, no matter the cost.

Hannibal turns away from the window. With a grim, upward tilt of his lips, he replies, “Good luck, Agent.”

Goodbye, my love.

They pair him with a man younger than he is. Fresh-faced, a green addition to the force. That's probably for the best. Perhaps they truly believe that Abel is on his way to the border, and thus the threat level is low.

The Ripper, though—even now, he is so tragically underestimated.

"May I make one phone call?" Hannibal asks the young man. "I'm afraid I had plans with my younger sister for the holiday, I need to make her aware that I… won't make it."

The man's face creases, but perhaps Hannibal looks wretched enough to evoke sympathy, for he replies, "Keep it under a minute. You can call from the van. Come on, let's go."

He is led to a large transport with tinted windows. The agent gets in the front. Gestures for Hannibal to get in the back. "Harder to see you," he says by way of explanation.

Hannibal gets in without complaint. To be out of the line of sight suits him perfectly.

The doors close. The engine turns over. Hannibal latches his seatbelt with the agent's eyes watching him in the rearview, the open and unsuspicious observation of one truly concerned for another's safety.

Hannibal lifts the phone to his ear and presses *dial.*

"God, I just saw, it's all over the news—"

"Stop." The soft command grates like gravel from Hannibal's throat, disappears under the whir of the wheels, the wheeze of the van's engine. Her breath catches, cuts her off short. The sound is not so unlike someone who's had a blade slipped between their ribs. "This is a courtesy call. Listen to me very closely." A beat of silence. "Are you listening?"

Margot swallows. *"Yes."*

"They know—but it's not too late to change things if you do exactly as I say. I can help you, if you ask me to."

A breath. Then—

"Please," she says. *"Help me help him."*

Hannibal glances up. The agent's eyes are fixed on the road as they pull off of Quantico's campus and head for the highway. Entirely focused, suspecting nothing.

Slowly, silently, he unbuckles his seatbelt. Slips his fingers into the inner breast pocket of his suit jacket, and pulls out a single-edge razor blade. "Wise choice."

Will could not speak to how much time may or may not have passed before Miriam returns with instructions to bring him to a private counsel chamber. The amount of time doesn't matter. It doesn't even matter that there is food and water and it's a comfortable temperature, or that they've seen fit to return his medication to him.

It doesn't matter.

Of course they went to Hannibal. Of course they told him their lies. Of course they did.

Because Will is a fucking idiot who somehow thought—

He would never leave us, Wilhelmina murmurs, but even she sounds uncertain. Deioss is talking at them, but Will is too far into his own head to hear anything he has to say. *He'll find a way to free us.*

Will withdraws from her. Pulls the blinds on that particular window, and shuts it out. Shuts down. Compartmentalizes.

Survival mode. It's all he can do.

"Can I talk to him?" Will had whispered to James, once he had returned from negotiating Will's temporary respite.

He'd known who Will meant. Well enough that his eyes were dull and his mouth was grim when he replied, *"I'm sorry, Will, he's already gone."*

Will is stuck in this place while Hannibal works out the truth on his own, inevitably comes to the wrong conclusions about everything. Perhaps he'll believe the affair, perhaps he won't. But the fact that Will worked with the FBI without confiding in him will be enough to cast doubt on everything else, from the first day to the very last night. How much of it was true, he'll wonder? Does it even matter? The Ripper is not one to stand for betrayal.

And Hannibal Lecter is a man of influence. He surely could have found a way to speak to Will if that was his intent. If he didn't stay, it's because he didn't want to. If he didn't want to…

Will can imagine the reason. His gamble hinged on two things: a successful return, and Hannibal's understanding. High stakes, double or nothing—and he lost.

He's already gone.

"Kid, you look like hell," Deioss says. He places a pill before Will on the table, alongside a paper cup of water and a plastic snack-pack of peanut butter crackers. It's certainly not the worst thing he could have come up with, but it's not great, either. "When's the last time you ate?"

"Last night at our dinner party," Will says softly. He picks up the packet of crackers, though he's nowhere near hungry, and peels open the plastic. Beggars can't be choosers, and there's no point in weakening himself with a hunger strike. Then, pointedly, "Which you missed. You know, you might end up having to take Hannibal's dinner offer, after all."

James huffs, and incredulous sound. Will's still draped in his jacket, but he doesn't seem concerned about the temperature. His sleeves are rolled up around his forearms, hands tucked in his pant pockets. His waistcoat and tie cut a nice figure, admittedly. He's exactly what Will pictures when he thinks of a young, cutthroat lawyer out to conquer the world. "Don't count us out of this yet. I wouldn't be half surprised if you were free by the end of the day."

Will pauses. He looks up. "That seems… presumptuous."

Deioss arches a brow. "You mean arrogant."

“Yeah, I mean arrogant.” Will presses down on the pill with the pad of his index finger; it clings to his skin, and he lifts it from the table. It’s not large, by any means. Certainly, the effects should be mild. But he’s in no mood to test how he’ll react to an anti-nausea medication when he needs his mind alert. He opens his mouth, makes a show of placing the pill against his lower lip, but carefully slips it between his index and middle fingers. Follows the gesture with a sip of water. Slips the pill into his pocket, and crushes it between his fingers until it’s little more than a pinch of powder. “There’s not a whole lot of people on my side right now. It seems arrogant to assume I’ll get out of this unscathed.”

“I’m good at assumptions—but I prefer to call them educated guesses. And educated guesses are based on odds and probabilities and foreknowledge. Hell, I’ll make one right now.” Deioss pauses in his idle pacing; he glances at the empty corners of the empty walls, and his eyes flicker about. No cameras. No record of their conversation, exactly as it should be, according to the laws.

And then James turns. Sits across from Will, and places his hands on the table. Folds them. His eyes are flat, deep green; his expression, unwavering. “You killed Mason Verger.”

Will doesn’t flinch, doesn’t blink, doesn’t move. His breath is even. His heart does not race. “That *is* a hell of an assumption to make.”

“But I’m right,” he says. “And me knowing that helps your case. The more I know about what you did, the better I can hide you from it. I know you’re not gonna tell me anything, but I want you to know that I know. And I *want* you to know that I know, *so* I make it home at the end of the day. Because you’re gonna walk away from this, one way or another. I’d like to do the same.”

Will sits up a little straighter; this is not a man who wears an affectation of fear, but rather, a shrewd practicality that outweighs all else. This is a man who makes implications of knowledge that’s not his to know. A man who swims with sharks, but knows the killer instinct well enough to see a wolf beneath sheep’s clothing. Fascinating. “You seem pretty certain I’m gonna walk away from this without a scratch.”

“You’re best friends with Margot Verger, who’s clearly been getting the shit beat out of her by her brother for as long as she’s been alive. With Mason Verger out of the way, she’s the sole heir to the Verger fortune, she’s got more money than God, and owes you her life. Not to mention you fucking hated the guy, because *everyone* hated the guy. But only some scrappy blue collar kid would have the fucking guts to take him on.” Deioss taps his index finger on the table, a quiet *thump-thump* with the pad of his finger that echoes a beating heart, that neither speeds nor slows. “And only someone who caught the attention of Hannibal Lecter would have the mind to get away with it.”

Inside him, Wilhelmina raises her head. Stares out from his eyes.

Deioss leans back in his seat with a silent, self-satisfied tilt to his lips, but there’s no humor on his face. “Yeah,” he says. “There you are.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Will replies, a quiet, warning growl.

“Cut the crap.” Deioss’ legs fall open wide, feet flat on the floor. His head is held high. His hands are folded in his lap. Confident posture. “I've known Hannibal Lecter a long time. Perfect manners, perfect gentleman, which already sets him apart from a lot of those high-class types. He’s friendly with everyone, sure, but he doesn’t like any of them. You can see the polite boredom from a mile away. If you’d asked me a year ago, I would have told you there probably wasn’t a person on this earth he could claim to love and mean it. So I’ll be honest—the fact that he claimed you as his personal responsibility tells me a lot of things about *you* that, given this unfortunate situation, I really wish I didn’t know.” His foot taps twice. *Thump-thump.* “But he told me the night he met you that

someday you'd come calling, and that I should take care of anything you needed. And at the Symphony Gala, when I asked him about it, he said it was more important now than ever, if it ever came up. And then at the Johns Hopkins thing, when he told me he planned to be with you for the rest of his life, and I thought, *oh, shit, now there's two."*

Thump-thump.

"Now, I grew up humble. I think you did, too. You and I, we've seen some shit. We know how the other half lives, and by the other half, I mean most of us. We've seen hard luck, hard times. It's just the way things go. But being a lawyer?"

Thump-thump.

Deioss scoffs. "People of privilege are accustomed to a certain way of doing things. They're used to getting their way. I'm a good lawyer—a *damn* good lawyer. It's my job to give people their way, but it never starts out sunshine and roses. Sometimes people get into tough spots. And when they do, you know what happens? They start to sweat."

Thump-thump.

"You know that phrase *the bigger they are, the harder they fall?* It's true. And they're not quiet about it when the house of cards starts comin' down. The more they have to lose, the more they fuss. I certainly get an earful most of the time, but even when I don't get the brunt of it, they stress. They wonder what they're gonna do. Hair pulling, nail biting, chain smoking, every vice you can think of. Everyone has some sort of reaction. Even the best people lose it." He inhales slowly, and blows out a quiet breath. "Not Hannibal, though. I've never seen that man crack. And in my experience, it's the ones who never bat an eye that you need to be really fuckin' scared of, because all the time they don't spend bitching, they spend it listening and they spend it thinking. And they're always the smartest person in the room."

Thump-thump.

"Let me tell you something that I've noticed about Hannibal. He thinks before he reacts… to *anything.* He goes through an entire higher thought process that most people never touch. I'm pretty sure he makes the decision which emotions he's going to allow himself to feel before he feels them." The words prickle across the side of Will's throat. He doesn't move his head, doesn't acknowledge it, but those green eyes fall to the bite mark like they were drawn there, anyway. "You have that in common—unless it's about him. And for him, unless it's about you. "

Will's lips press together firmly. His tongue touches the inside of his teeth. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that they starved you, froze you, denied you medication that you told them you needed, then accused you of murder, and you didn't give a shit. Even a person who *knows* they didn't commit murder would start to break down under those sorts of conditions, but you didn't. And you didn't because—because, you know you *did* do it, and you know they don't have a leg to stand on, because you covered your ass. And when you *did* start to give a shit was when you thought you'd lost him because of what they were saying, like Hannibal-fucking-Lecter doesn't know the games cops and lawyers play. I promise you, he does."

And Will's lip curls back. Wilhelmina stares at this man, this *threat.*

But we need all the allies we can get. "But he left."

“But he left,” Deioss agrees. “Why do you think he did that, after everything he’s done for you? After the lengths he’s gone to tie the two of you together in ways that are *not easy* to undo? Do you really think it’s because a man like that decided to trust a cop, or because he wanted the cops to trust *him?”* He leans forward. His eyes hold Will’s. “I’m a white collar lawyer. It’s not my job to make sure the good guys win. It’s my job to make sure the *right* guys win. And it’s in my best interests to get you back to him, so I can go the fuck home knowing he’s happy, whatever that looks like—and secure in the knowledge that he finds me uniquely, irreplaceably useful.”

It’s strangely comforting, in a way, to know that he is in the company of a kindred soul. To know that he is seen, and that Hannibal’s love for him is something clearly visible to the naked eye of those who pay attention. It… soothes him.

And it is vindicating to know this man knows what he is capable of, and while he accepts it for his own benefit, he is so clearly, visibly disturbed by it.

Will *is* comforted. But he’s not stupid.

“You say whatever you want to say,” he mutters. “I’m not confessing anything to them.”

“Good, keep your mouth shut, it makes my job easier,” Deioss retorts. “I just wanted us on the same page. It’s only a matter of time until the cavalry shows up to your aid about the murder charges, I can’t have you tossing yourself in a cell before then. The accessory and data stuff might be a little trickier, but I’ll work it out. I’m not sweating the details.”

“Actually…” At long last, Will picks up a cracker and crushes it between his teeth. “That part’s covered.”

His eyes narrow on Will. He sits up straight. “Are you telling me that you pulled me out of bed at the crack of dawn on Christmas Eve, and we’ve been freezing our asses off here for however many godforsaken hours, while *you* had an ace up your sleeve that you didn’t bother to tell me about?”

“Didn’t have a secure place to talk until now, though, did we?” Will takes the blazer from his shoulders. “Do you want this back?”

“No, keep it. This’ll work better if you look pathetic.” James’ eyes light up, green as vipers slithering through the underbrush. “Have you ever considered going into law?”

Wilhelmina’s brows lift. Her jaws part. She laughs, and Will says, “No. Not even once.”

“Good, I don’t need the competition,” Deioss replies. He looks satisfied.

It’s strange coming home when his world has been tipped on its axis. It feels emptier without Will—and yet, somehow, strangely void of the comfort it once held. Nostalgic, tinted with melancholy. Perhaps it’s the events of the day. Or perhaps it’s because his mind already knows what his body does not:

This is the last time he will ever walk through this house.

He enters through the door behind the garage and descends through the narrow staircase. There is a concealed switch for the lights at the bottom that he hits—and looks back up them.

That explains how he left without triggering the alarm.

Hannibal strips from his clothes, wet with stains. Balls them up in his soiled palms, and approaches the furnace. Opens the metal latch. Tosses them in. Fires it up. It'll take some time to heat up, but it will automatically cycle down when it's done. Then goes to the sink. There's blood upon his hands, beneath his nails. There is a pump dispenser of medical-grade sterilization soap; beside it, a bristled scrub brush. He washes his hands up to his elbows, until the skin is red with friction and warm to the touch. He washes his face. Sticks his head beneath the tap, and when he emerges from the flow with a gasping breath, towels himself dry with the terrycloth off to the side. It's not ideal, but if it keeps any evidence of blood out of his upstairs shower, it'll do just fine.

Then he retreats to the antechamber, and grabs a form-fitting shirt, a pair of pants, undergarments, socks, a set of boots. He dresses without fuss, then ducks back down for a heavy-weight black duffel bag. In it, he puts another set of his so-called *work clothes,* and roll of medical tools. He wonders what Will had brought with him when he displayed Annalise—that sort of posing takes a great deal of effort and attention, not to mention physical strength. It's encouraging for the future; admirable, especially for someone who so recently went through the physical ordeal Will endured.

He pauses; flips through the array of license plates neatly nested together. As he had seen in the photos, the noted license plates from his transport vehicle at the Press Club are gone.

Will must've found the basement at some point past—but when? Oh, the things Hannibal would have given to walk alongside him, to see the realization on his face. Was is an accident that he ended up down here? Or did he enter knowing what he might find?

Still, a bold presumption to take something of Hannibal's. He doesn't filter through the license plates often, he'll admit, but he's sure he would have noticed at some point in the near future. It was a gamble for Will to take them…

…and, apparently, two of his custom protective suits. Recently, then. Very recently.

And that explains why the FBI has no evidence.

Fortunately, there is one left. One is all he needs.

He packs them up together, along with a pair of sterile gloves, a length of rope. Stands. Proceeds. Lingers, once he reaches the bottom of the stairs, and turns with a quiet breath to look out at this place he's so carefully made. After all this time, it was nearly perfect, but…

He will have a chance to build a new one, though it will surely be lacking in the extensive and historic collection of Baltimore's underground tunnel system. Truly, they've been a boon to his movements.

He'll be sure to put them to use one last time.

He ascends.

There's limited time for him to do all he needs to do, so he moves quickly. No time to linger in the kitchen and reminisce, no time to walk the halls and allow them to fill with memory. He's familiar enough with it all, anyway; his memory palace is fully constructed, and will replay the events this place has witnessed whenever he desires.

He goes to the study; no time to mourn the priceless books and artifacts. New keepsakes can be collected in a new place. Instead, he sits before his desk, extracts his keys, unlocks the tray that runs along the underside of the desk's surface. Inside is nearly empty—except for a black folder, a thick manila envelope, and a plain gray thumb drive.

He takes the USB stick and the manila envelope, then tucks them into his bag. He leaves the folder, and leaves the drawer unlocked.

Stands; there's nothing else he needs, though there are plenty of items he would take or arrange to be shipped if he had the time, but alas—

Before he can cross the threshold, he stops. Through the light of the window beside the harpsichord, a little glass figure catches a sunbeam atop the music stand. The white lacquer is yellowing, the rich brown accents are now a faded tan, the black speckle of a nose is barely gray. It's old, and the varnish is cracked; one of Will's dog figurines that surely belonged to his father. This one is shaped vaguely like a border collie, and was surely colored to resemble one, once upon a time.

Now, though, there is something about the sandy patina, the shape of the body, the perk of the ears, that reminds him of Winston. Reminds him of that night, bundled on Will's living room floor in a pile of blankets, the lax heat of his body. It reminds him of the empty dog bowls waiting in the corner of the kitchen even now, and the promises he'd made. It was a future that he was… looking forward to sharing. With Will.

Hannibal picks it up; it's no larger than two fingers are long, and about as wide. It won't take much space. He kneels, and tucks it within the fabric folded inside—but there is a great deal to do, and little time in which to do it. This is as much sentimentality as he can allow.

He moves on.

For all the many complicated happenings that led them to this point, Abel Gideon is not a stupid man. Hannibal knows this, not only because Abel has been his colleague at one of the most prestigious hospitals in the country, but also because Will would not have wasted his time with someone he truly considered to be an idiot.

It's how Hannibal knows exactly how this scene will end before it does.

Abel Gideon *knows* he's not the Ripper; he never would have consented to being framed as such. He likely operated under the assumption that the display of his wife's body would be lost among the other victims. Hannibal knows Will's work; whether or not he was responsible for her death is irrelevant, for Will was the one who transformed her.

Hannibal can admit, privately and within his own mind, that Abel Gideon was not the *worst* choice for a stand-in. However, it's a choice Hannibal would have preferred to know about so he could lay the appropriate contingency plans *himself.* Instead, he must work quickly, thoroughly, and effectively. Where Will failed, Hannibal cannot afford to do the same. His beloved has passed the baton, and now Hannibal must race to close the gap before another beats him to the inevitable conclusion.

Abel Gideon will surely be out for retribution in any way he can get it. Hannibal and Margot, of course, are out of his reach. He has no easy avenue from which to strike at that which Will loves. But Will destroyed his reputation—it stands to reason that Gideon would seek to do the same.

And there is one person Hannibal can think of who would be overjoyed to help him do that. Fortunately, he knows exactly where to find her.

The apartment building is run-down, faded brick and chipped mortar halfway between Baltimore and College Park. It's a nowhere place, out of the way, and the access door is up the very same fire escape that she would be meant to evacuate from in the event of an emergency. The lack of inherent safety is probably the only reason it's affordable to a college student living alone—just one door in and out.

That's not an issue. After all, he won't need to move them. Not this time.

He leaves the junk car just below the fire escape; the vehicle blends into the neighborhood, in truth. Christmas Eve, everyone locked in their homes, scared of the Ripper, but expecting the wrong face. No one will notice it, or him, and he won't be here for long.

Hannibal carries the duffel on his shoulder as he climbs the stairs of the fire escape. For all that they are rusted, they're sturdy, and make little noise at all. Excellent. He then tests the front door; it's locked, but there's some give to the handle. It takes no time at all to coax the lock open in silence. When it swings open, the vindication is sweet, and sweeter yet at the sound of the voices inside.

"—so unless you plan on coding the site yourself, I'd *really* appreciate it if you pointed that gun somewhere else."

"There's no need for skepticism, Miss Lounds. You do what you promised, and I'll keep my promises and get out of your pretty hair. It's just, you see, the *last* time someone made me promises, it didn't work out so well for me. Call the gun my collateral until our transaction is complete."

"I showed you what I had. You agreed, it's *more* than enough to make sure—"

"Oh, there's no such thing as *more than enough,"* Gideon snarls, and Hannibal bares his teeth instinctively, though they cannot see him where he is concealed in the narrow hallway. Gideon must have her in whatever passes for her living space.

As for what she has, well *that* is something Hannibal, too, would like to see.

He places the bag down slowly. Crouches like a beast, unzips it in silence.

"I want you to write," he starts again, and in the background, there is the heavy sound of metal tapping something metal, "that Will Graham *framed* me. That murdering my wife was his idea—and it was, Freddie, it *was* his idea—and that he leveraged the threat of the Chesapeake Ripper to make me do whatever he wanted. He texted *me* last night with no warning. He didn't care Anna's family was there. And when Will came to make sure I'd done it, he killed them himself, then told me to get rid of their bodies. Will Graham put those *goddamn license plates* in my car, and set my house on fire. He gave my wife's body to the Ripper, then they killed Mason Verger, and now they're framing me for everything so they can get away clean. That's what I want you to write. You can call it *Bride of the Ripper.* You can publish their love notes. And between what I have and what you have, I think the people will go for it, don't you? You might even get a sweet little book deal out of the whole thing."

He has this down to a science. The suit zips all the way down the side, and getting into it is practically muscle memory. He zips it up, hides the sound beneath the cadence of Gideon's voice as he listens to

the story he spins. In another world, it's what might have been. But in this world, even the suggestion of it all is adding insult to injury, denying him what *should* have been his. Hannibal lifts his head, scents the air. Old smoke. Fresh sweat.

A quiet moment. A tentative question, that bears a thread of manufactured innocence, "Aren't *you* the Chesapeake Ripper?"

One beat of silence, followed by a dangerous other. "Miss Lounds, there's no need to patronize me."

"I'm sorry," she replies so very softly, though she sounds no more sincere. "But it's a valid question. The first thing the readers will come up with. Every story on the air is convinced you're it, you're the guy. Imagine what they'd say about me if they asked *is Abel Gideon the Ripper?* And I said *I don't know, I never asked."*

Hannibal takes a scalpel from his kit, fitted with a #36 blade—his personal favorite for this type of thing. The instrument is an extension of his arm, its razor edge, an extension of his will. The perfect marriage of a surgical tool and a chef's knife.

"Oh," Gideon sighs, "I think everyone knows you're not that type of woman, Miss Lounds. From what you've shown me, you are… very thorough."

"So I am," she agrees. "And so are you, it seems."

"Yes I am. So start typing."

There is a doorway immediately to Hannibal's right, but if he goes straight back, there is a kitchenette that likely ties into the adjacent living space. He runs the risk of them hearing his footsteps if he's to go around, and the element of surprise means nothing at all to Gideon's gun if he reveals himself by accident. On purpose, though, he has the upper hand.

And, purrs the predator in the back of his mind, *if I make my entry here, I'm between them and the door.*

And so it begins.

Gideon sits in a threadbare, oversized chair, facing toward the kitchen. He taps a dull silver handgun idly on the armrest; Freddie, across from him, on a faded floral couch, her laptop propped open on the coffee table, its faded surface ringed with water stains. Her camera rests beside it. Her hands shake—clearly not as unaffected as she'd like Gideon to believe.

When he enters, they both look up. Both stare.

"Hannibal," Gideon says slowly, and the tapping comes to a stop. His eyes narrow. He hasn't put it together yet. His eyes linger on the plastic suit. "…fancy seeing you here."

"Doctor Lecter, what are you—" Freddie stops. Then, suddenly, her pupils dilate. Her face drains of color, leaving her a sickly gray, right to the flaring-red roots of her ringlet curls. "Oh my god."

"Freddie," Hannibal replies pleasantly. Oh, today has hardly been anything he'd hoped it to be, but it would be foolish not to savor this. "I believe I owed you a visit. And Abel, I'm glad you made it. I hoped you would."

Freddie's jaw clenches so hard that Hannibal can hear her teeth creak. He'd advise her to relax it as to not hurt her jaw, but that won't matter in a moment. He'll allow her her vices. She stops typing.

Slowly, she pulls her hands into her lap. Clutches at the loose fabric of her jeans, for lack of anything else to cling to.

Fortunately for her, Gideon doesn't seem to care when there's a challenger in the room. He's uncertain what he's facing, but he can clearly sense Hannibal's confidence, which is reason enough to be alarmed. Slowly, casually, he makes to stand. He doesn't move the gun much, as though perhaps Hannibal won't notice it if he doesn't draw attention to it. Hannibal's eyes drop to it pointedly, though the upward tilt of his lips is impossible to shake.

The hunter is in his element. He's not killing solely for sport, though the sport of it certainly helps. He's here with a mission, and one that he intends to fulfill.

"You know, I had hoped to run into you," Gideon says. His tongue darts out to wet his lips, eyes narrowed in consideration. His mind is working overtime, though Freddie's seems to have already arrived at the correct conclusion. "Though, this doesn't exactly feel like that kind of coincidence."

And then he glances down, and catches sight of the scalpel held loosely between Hannibal's fingers. His brows draw together.

"It's not," Hannibal replies, and bares his teeth in a smile. "I heard about your wife. Terrible thing, that. You have my condolences, though I suspect you don't want or need them."

"Ding dong, the bitch is dead," Abel drawls. He shoots a glance to Freddie, making sure she's still where he left her. Glances back to Hannibal, and says slowly, "You heard about my wife… well, then I suppose you've heard about yours. If we're trading condolences, I'd offer mine, but…" He sneers, "I'm not really that broken up about it."

Anger claws at Hannibal's insides, gnaws at his spine. His smile sharpens; it no longer feels pleasant. "Not to worry, I have every confidence he'll be released by the end of the day. Will's very good at what he does."

"I should have known." Freddie's voice is weak, thin. Angry. "God. I was looking right at you and I didn't see it. Why the fuck else would you want him?" Her voice shakes; Hannibal's temper lurches, a serpent preparing to strike as her vitriol builds momentum. "Fucking *intellectually compatible*— passing notes in the site code like kids in class. Of course you weren't worried about him using you. You were feeding him information so he could write his goddamn articles."

"Actually, I rather believe that was our dear friend Doctor Gideon," Hannibal replies coolly. "I only supplied the victims."

It clicks. Gideon's every motion falls still. *"You."*

"Yes, me." Hannibal's fingers twitch; the scalpel sways between them, a pendulum sharp enough to slice space-time so Hannibal might stitch it back together in the order he prefers. "And you. Imagine my surprise when I found out what Will was up to last night. You've made quite the mess of things, Abel."

Gideon snarls, a coiled spring; his arm snaps up, and Hannibal feints. Lunges.

The first shot barrels into the wall behind him. Freddie screams, scrambles back. The second and third hit the floor and the chair respectively as Hannibal pivots the scalpel and slices through the tendon in Abel's dominant wrist.

The gun falls, clatters to the floor, and Hannibal pinches hard at the junction of Gideon's neck and shoulder. The man's legs give out from beneath him, and his considerable weight collapses upon the chair, which groans a tortured protest at the abuse.

Freddie's back hits the opposite arm of the couch, but she's boxed herself in with no easy way up now that she's off her feet. It would take a second more than she'd have in order to make a successful escape. She's smart enough to know it. Hannibal's counting on that to keep her in one place. It would be truly unfortunate if she were to try to bolt.

"You're an excellent doctor, Abel. If you had used the finesse in your murders that you use in your surgeries, this likely never would have happened. Instead, we've been left with a spectacle and an unfortunate situation: you want to get revenge on Will, and you've also put something of a tarnish on my reputation with your antics. I'd like to see that corrected."

Gideon grimaces at the squeeze of Hannibal's thumb and forefinger against his vagus nerve; his muscles twitch as they scream for oxygen. A hard jab, which renders the victim unconscious, is so unlike a slow, suffocating compression. He's been told it's more like setting the entire central nervous system on fire. It seems only fitting, if it's true.

"So I'm guessing this is where you kill me."

"You'd be right." Hannibal adjusts his hold on the scalpel to adjust for the slickness of Gideon's blood against his plastic-covered fingertips. "If it's any consolation, I don't have as much time as I'd prefer to take, considering the circumstances."

"Thanks for that."

Hannibal's nostrils flare. Though Gideon exudes a certain aloofness, his heart thrums fast beneath Hannibal's grip. He stinks of fear. Reeks of pain. He deserves all of it and more. "I didn't say it would be merciful. Just faster than I'd like."

He draws the blade deeply across Gideon's throat, cuts down to bone, pinches hard at the nerve in his grip as Abel reflexively bucks and starts to convulse—then readjusts, presses his thumb at the corner of his jaw to pry it open, and severs the connective tissue beneath the tongue. And then a bit further back. And as the blood spills over Gideon's chest and bubbles out his mouth, as the strength leaves his limbs and the shock settles in, as Freddie gasps in horror and bites back a scream, Hannibal grabs Gideon's tongue in his fist and rips it backwards, then forces the bulk of it down his esophagus and feeds it back through the incision.

It writhes, and Abel chokes, and blood soaks into his shirt and the chair and runs in rivulets over Hannibal's plastic suit.

He watches until the twitches stop. He wonders what it would have been like to cut fillets from Abel's tongue and marinade them. He wonders what it would have been like to take this man apart at every joint, to make it slow, to feed Will the meat as it falls off the bone while the swine still lives and breathes and screams.

The Chesapeake Ripper, a common family annihilator and killer of children?

The Chesapeake Ripper, a man who somehow manages to get spotted while sinking a car into a river in the winter in an abandoned state park?

The Chesapeake Ripper, slaughtered in a college co-ed's apartment without even managing to wound his assailant in return?

Perhaps Abel Gideon's version of the Chesapeake Ripper. But not Hannibal's. And he'll make sure the world knows it.

Hannibal wipes the scalpel blade on Gideon's sleeve. Considers his body. Hums appreciatively—he'll make some adjustments once all's said and done, but not bad for an unfinished project. "My apologies, Miss Lounds. Where were we?"

There are tears in her eyes, though to her credit, they seem to be more reflexive horror than anything. She doesn't blubber, even when they drip and fall. "Any chance I could, uh," she sniffles, and rubs daintily at her reddening nose. "Opt out of that?"

Hannibal lifts his head. Schools his expression to one of faint, wry amusement as he turns to face her with an arched brow, and says, "Did you have something else in mind?"

Freddie shakes like a fawn, but but her voice is deceptively light. "Not dying would be great."

Oh, well that ship set sail long ago. Still, Hannibal allows himself to look like he's considering it. Then, slowly, evenly, he walks to the couch. Turns. Sits. Pats the cushion beside him. "Come sit, Freddie. Bring your camera."

She doesn't move. He cannot blame her for it, nor for her flinch when Hannibal slowly, slowly leans forward and makes a clear show of placing the scalpel on the table—the side of it furthest from her, but also more than an arm's length from himself. Then he sits back.

"You should know, if you try to grab it, I will stop you. But in the meantime, you may sit beside me knowing it's out of my reach. Now, come; I'm very interested in what evidence you've collected on Will."

She doesn't do it happily, for certain. But she comes, and though her eyes linger on the scalpel, she only reaches for the camera. It's a bulky thing; digital with an automatic display, but none of the hallmarks of more modern pieces like wireless or bluetooth compatibility. Still, she is able to call up whatever is on her memory card and show it to him on the preview screen.

It seems she has an entire memory card dedicated to Will.

"Show me," he says, and she does. It seems Will's been quite busy—and Freddie has, too. "You seem to dedicate a great deal of time to following him."

Her cheeks flush red, angry. "I knew he was up to something. Obviously I was right."

She has pictures of Will in Washington, walking between shops with Margot; studying in the campus library, in the newsrooms beside his friend Peter; alone on darkened streets, in progressions that lead to shadowed shots of Will in a car with someone else, simply sitting in the passenger seat with the lights off. Upon further scrolling, that person is shown to be Abel Gideon. And then another meeting. And another.

She has pictures of Will in an outfit Hannibal remembers vividly for the day it accompanied—his black leather skirt and sheer white blouse, paired with the Louboutins, that afternoon Will accosted him in his office at the hospital. There are a lot of photos of that outfit, actually. And one of Will's clothing slightly askew, his cheeks flushed as he'd emerged afterward, wrapped in his coat and his

work boots, satchel slung over his shoulder. It's quintessentially Will; a lovely capture, all things considered.

Freddie is clearly a skilled photographer, and an accomplished stalker.

And then she goes back a little further, to the front of Will's house from a distance. To a box on the front porch that Hannibal recognizes intimately. To a picture of the box with the lid carefully removed, and the contents lovingly arranged inside. The noose. The flowers. The heart nestled in the center.

From afar again—as Will picked up the box with a look on his face that spoke of being startled, pleased, and keenly anticipatory as he carried it inside. The pleasure of it warms his chest. *You knew even then.*

"You were waiting outside his house before he got home," Hannibal says. He shoots her a sidelong glance, and absorbs her vibrating anxiety in the wake of this revelation. But Hannibal has suspected from her quick supposition that she knew everything. This turn of events is surprising, but hardly a shock. Still, it's good fun to torment her. There's nothing she can do about it, after all, and she deserves so much *more.* "It's a crime to open another's mail."

"It wasn't addressed to anyone," she snaps, like she's been *waiting* to justify herself regarding the matter. Hannibal does not point out that she is defending her comparatively mild felony of mail fraud with serial murder.

One more: this one taken with a telephoto lens through Will's kitchen window. Will's laptop is open on the counter beside him, and he stares at it intently as he slices the silver blade of a knife through the heart's silvery membrane. It lies, butterflied and face down, on a cutting board.

"Was it human?" Freddie asks because her curiosity demands her to, though the dread-ridden quality of her voice says she already knows the answer and wishes she didn't have to ask.

Hannibal smiles. "Yes, it was."

She lurches, but does not abandon the couch, or abandon her breakfast. Whispers, "Christ." Then, "Did you mean for him to eat it?"

"I never dreamed he would," Hannibal admits easily. "That revelation came as quite the pleasant surprise."

Freddie presses her hand firmly over her mouth. Her eyes flicker to Gideon's cooling corpse; he'll want to take care of that soon, before he voids himself and starts to stink. The ugly realities of death. As a doctor, he sees it often. Freddie, not so much. "So you eat people."

"I do."

"If you had to guess, what percentage of your diet is people?"

It's a surprising question. Hannibal considers this. "If we're talking purely about the providence of proteins present in meals, I'd imagine… seventy is a solid estimate."

"Christ."

"It's my preference, but I'll eat any meat if it's high quality and ethically sourced."

“A real humanitarian,” Freddie snaps. Then her eyes widen. She pales. Gags. “Oh, God.”

Hannibal’s smile widens, bares his teeth. He reaches for the camera; she gives it to him without a fight, though watches with some amount of despair as he opens the memory card slot and depresses it until it disengages, and pops out against his thumb. Really, it would be so easy to wipe the card, but. Well. Freddie is an excellent photographer. It would be a shame to put her hard work to waste when she captured so many lovely images of Will, and so many more he has yet to see. He slips it under the sleeve of the protective suit, past the elastic that keeps it sealed around his wrists. That’ll do for now.

“And given that I heard you mention the notes Will left for me, I’d like the rest of your hard drives and backups, if you please. All of them.” He sees the gleam in her eyes and heads it off. “I will know it if you lie to me, and I will make time in my schedule to ensure your honesty. A wise doctor makes sure they have all the tools they need at their disposal. I brought far more with me than just my scalpel.”

“And you’ll kill me if I try to run, and you’ll kill me if I try to call anyone.”

Now the despair is starting to set in—and also a fundamental lack of understanding of exactly the kind of man that Hannibal is. “No, Freddie,” he replies mildly. “I won’t kill you. Not immediately. I want to ensure I have everything I came for. Deleting your data, *all* of it, is important to me. That means your hard drives, your backups, your SD and micro-SD cards, your tablets, your laptops, your cell phones. And the audio recording device you have hidden in your bra, please. I’d rather not have to remove it myself.”

Hannibal glances to the scalpel, then back to her. It’s a clear warning.

“And if you leave anything out, or if you try to run or call anyone, I will catch you and secure you to this table. Human bodies can weather an astounding amount before succumbing to shock and heart failure, and blood loss takes much longer than one would think, as long as I avoid the major arteries. For example, I could flay your hands and fingers to expose the tendons, then break apart the bones at the joints. Ten fingers, three phalanges each, and then all the connective tissue—it would take me quite some time. And if for some reason you weathered through that, you have an additional ten toes, and a number of unnecessary evolutionary accessories that I would be pleased to help you remove. I’m confident in my ability to keep you alive, secure, and quiet enough that no one will discover what is happening here until it’s over. No one is looking for you, Freddie. I’d prefer to keep this quick, but I’m willing to make exceptions.”

She cycles through the five stages of grief with some haste, to her credit. And then she starts gathering her devices, one by one—enough of them, and with enough dread in her face that Hannibal is confident she’s given him all of them. Photos. Videos. Backups.

The audio recorder goes last. She clings to it, a safety blanket. Hannibal is sure it’s recording, even now. “What is it you’ve recorded that you’re so reluctant to destroy? Other than my full confession, of course.”

“Of course,” she agrees softly. Hesitates, and then decides it’s not worth it. “Will threatened me.”

Hannibal’s brows raise. “Did he?”

Freddie’s lips thin. She glances away. “I… alright, I threatened him first. But it was what he said. How he said it.”

A side of Will Hannibal has rarely seen. He’s undeniably intrigued. “Play it.”

She does.

“I didn’t steal those fucking notes. I didn’t need a psychiatrist to tell me you were a nutcase, I already knew that. But I think it’s interesting that a professional saw it in you, too. And that Crawford so helpfully decided to overlook that diagnosis, and the fact that we both know damn well you’re running Abnormal Analysis.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Cut the shit, Graham. I’m not an idiot. It’s barely even a secret anymore. You’re helping the FBI. It’s the only reason why Crawford wouldn’t arrest you, too.”

“You better be careful with accusations like that, especially without proof. You’ll get someone killed.” Will’s voice softens, cold as the first falls of winter snow. It’s a dangerous tone.

Hannibal’s mouth goes dry.

“See, the thing is, normally I would care about something like that. But if it’s you, Graham, then I don’t. Do you know why?”

“Enlighten me.”

“Because a psychopath like you is not actually helping the FBI. You’re using them, just like you’re using the nice doctor in there. You have him all wrapped up around your little finger, buying you nice things in exchange for you putting out, but the second he becomes inconvenient, you’re gonna give him right to the Ripper. Hell, I wouldn’t be surprised if you’re steering Crawford in completely the wrong direction, making the best of a bad situation to score your murder husband a Get Out Of Jail Free card. They’ll never catch the Chesapeake Ripper as long as you’re on the case, because you don’t want them to. You’ll make a nice little nest egg on your ad money and run off into the sunset at first chance. And for all you like to get preachy and soapbox-y about how I’m gonna get people killed, that’s not on me. That’s on you. And you don’t even have the capacity to care.”

Hannibal’s brows rise. Some convoluted feeling twists in his gut. Did it seem so obvious to everyone else where Will’s allegiance lay? Why, then, did Will not come to him? Not talk to him? Why did it have to come to this?

And then the tone of the recording shifts.

“Freddie, let me tell you something about everything you just said.”

That is the sound of danger made human. Hannibal knows it well.

“Don’t come any closer.” She’s afraid. Beside him, she tenses at the sound of her own fear, trapped under the force of the memory.

“And I’ll start with the fact that you better hope you’re wrong about everything you said, because if it were true, you’d be dead by the morning for showing me your hand. You think the world’s gonna notice one undergrad gone missing? Jack Crawford would think you skipped town. You’re a criminal, after all. Who’d believe the Ripper came after you? You didn’t trust anyone enough to tell them your suspicions. I expect you thought I’d cower, or bend my head. Ask you what you want. But I don’t give a shit what you want, because you have nothing on me. But I can tell you what—if you publish that the writer of Abnormal Analysis is working with the FBI, and if it were true, and you blew their cover, you’d be arrested. For good, this time. And they would die.”

Hannibal goes still. That voice is vicious, it's angry. Defensive. Afraid.

And under those circumstances, if Hannibal had heard from another that Will was working with the FBI… he likes to think that he would have approached it with tact, truly he does—but it's impossible to know. His heart and mind are irrational when it comes to Will.

Will had been afraid. Perhaps he had been right to be.

"But if they disappear, Freddie, everyone will notice. Their readers will notice. The FBI will notice. But you know what the most dangerous thing of all would be, for you? Whoever writes that website, the Chesapeake Ripper is in love with them. Whether or not you think that person's intentions are genuine, the phrase 'shoot the messenger' exists for a reason. And I, personally, would not want to be the person responsible for breaking his heart."

A moment of silence as Will allowed the words to sink in. Oh, what Hannibal would give to have seen him at this moment, been able to read the truth of his thoughts and intentions from his body in motion, from his scent.

But Will was not wrong. If this had happened any other way, if they had both been free when the revelation came instead of trapped by circumstance, Hannibal has no doubt that whoever had foolishly broken the illusion of peace between them would have paid dearly for it. It's just the nature of the beast.

"Get off of my car. Get off of the hospital property. If I see you following me, I will take Hannibal's advice and get a restraining order. I'm sick of this bullshit, I'm done. Go."

The sound cuts out with the rhythm of footsteps fleeing into silence.

Hannibal sits up straight. His good humor has soured. "Delete it. And the recording you've taken of me." She does. "What else do you have?"

"Nothing," she replies emphatically. A vein in her neck has started to throb, dim and fast. "Nothing, I swear. After I saw you at the hospital, my investigation never came near you. I was focused on Will; where he went, who he saw. All those notes he was sending out to the Ripper—I thought you were a lost cause."

"Undoubtedly, I am." Hannibal's eyes drag over the devices, their wiped memory cards, the USB sticks, the external hard drives, everything. He's had her clear all of them. "Then I suppose that's everything." A thought. "Though, for honesty's sake, and so you might have the satisfaction of knowing the truth, it wasn't Will who planted Doctor Chilton's notes among your belongings. I'm sure he had no idea what you were talking about. And as a psychiatrist, Doctor Chilton's opinion holds remarkably low esteem among his peers."

Freddie makes a noise of disgust; Hannibal stands and reflexively brushes his hands over his torso as though smoothing wrinkles from wool instead of protective plastic, and reaches for the scalpel.

"Tell me something," Freddie says. Her voice is starting to shake in earnest, but when Hannibal turns to her, she only looks angry. Teeth bared, a a young fox faced with something much larger, much smarter, and with much more power and influence than she. "Since you're in the mood for honesty. I saw this shit in Graham from day one. The posturing, the *I don't know what you're talking about* bullshit. But he's exactly what I thought he was. He's known, hasn't he? From the very beginning."

“In truth, I couldn’t tell you,” Hannibal replies. His eyes find the quick flutter at her throat. “But I fully intend to find out.”

“You didn’t—? No, wait, *wait!”* she shrieks, and Hannibal pauses only to raise his eyebrows at her; her head lolls as he catches her by the neck and holds her still, secure. But her eyes are not on him, they’re on Abel Gideon’s body, dead in the room. “Please—let me die first. *Please.”*

Hannibal considers it. She’s had her uses; provided him information he needed, and put up minimal resistance. Without her, perhaps he and Will may never have met.

But in absentia of Will’s hand holding the blade, giving Freddie Lounds anything less than she deserves would be more than a betrayal: it would be a waste.

And he’s been looking forward for this.

Freddie’s pupils dilate, eyes pleading, mouth opening—

Hannibal smiles. “No.”

When the bodies have been arranged and he’s swapped out his gloves for a fresh pair, Hannibal takes precisely one picture and opens the tab Freddie was working on.

> ***Bride of the Ripper*** *— Abel Gideon proclaims his innocence! Read all about Will Graham’s fatal manipulations, the truth of what happened, and how the FBI missed what was right in front of them.*

Right in front of them, indeed. Alas, this title is far from flattering, and casting more doubt onto Will’s innocence is exactly the opposite of what he wants. But the page editor is still open…

> ***In the Ripper’s Shadow*** *— Reporting from the hands of a serial killer! The truth of what happened, and how the FBI missed what was right in front of them.*

He deletes the body text. Adds the photograph. Hits *post.* Leaves the laptop open on the coffee table for the FBI to find. Hannibal gathers his things and casts a watchful eye around the apartment; all is as it should be, with no evidence he has ever been there.

There is only one piece left to this plan, but it is the most crucial, the most important.

There is a lingering sense of unease that is trampled into submission by stubborn pride. There’s no room for hesitation—he must see this through to the end, and in the aftermath, let the pieces of their shattered hearts fall where they may.

He’ll understand. He must. The alternative—

There is no alternative, says the monster in the back of his mind, not yet at rest, but perilously still. Watching. Waiting. Perhaps to see if he will betray himself, or if he will do what needs to be done.

Hannibal is not the type to leave things unfinished. It *must* be done.

He leaves the door unlocked behind him. He’s gone long before the sirens start.

“We just received a call.”

Jack Crawford and Kade Prurnell sit across the metal table. James Deioss is positioned beside Will, his hands folded atop a manila folder containing a concealed sheet of paper. Will, exhausted and emotionally worn as he is, holds Deioss’ jacket around his shoulders. It’s not particularly thick, and those peanut butter crackers did little to help his stomach fend off the hunger pangs. He’ll be the first to admit he’s not in great shape, but he’s hanging in there. There’s no other option.

Kade’s manicured fingers drum on the stainless. “Molson Verger has reached out to us regarding the murder of his son. He has allowed our techs to review the security logs on the property, which show no unauthorized activity last night in or out of the main gates. In addition to this, we intercepted a manifesto from a foreign rival packer with whom the Vergers had a deal gone south. Cyber forensics traced the email back to the group in Italy, which is known to have ties to mafia and the counterfeit food trade, specifically fabricated Parma Hams. It seems the patriarch was insulted by Mr. Verger’s dismissal of the quality of his wares, as well as some… unsavory behavior that transpired between the families behind closed doors. Though we are well aware there is no love lost between Mr. Verger and Mr. Graham, in the absence of evidence against him, and with a credible confession from a separate source, Will has been dismissed as a suspect.”

Will exhales softly.

“Thank you for letting us know,” James replies calmly. “What about the cases of Annalise Gideon and her family?”

The air grows tense. Kade’s tapping fingers come to a stop. “At this time, we have not been able to confirm or deny Will’s presence at either scene, or his involvement with them.”

“So you have no reasonable suspicion, and thus no cause to hold them.”

“We have cause to hold Will,” Jack replies, voice terse. “For data breach violations and unauthorized access to crime scenes.”

Will’s eyes narrow. He looks sidelong at James, who meets his gaze and nods. He lifts his hands, opens the folder. Removes the page, bearing the official seal of the FBI at the top, and a small collection of signatures at the bottom. Turns it. Slides it across the table. “Do you recognize this piece of paper?”

Jack blanches.

Kade Prurnell goes very, very still—and then, like a lioness turning on her own, sets her jaw and turns her head to Jack. “You did not.”

“Agent Crawford, please answer the question.”

Jack meets Will’s eyes over the table, accusing. Will doesn’t react. He’s not a fool, he knows how this kind of thing goes. The weakest link gets the short straw. When shit goes belly-up, it’s the disposable

person who gets shafted. Will's not FBI. To them, when things go bad and they need to cover their ass, Will becomes that person.

But as he told Jack Crawford in that dingy truck stop diner, he's *not* going to jail. And to Jack's misfortune, he'd agreed.

"It is a… legal contract," Jack says slowly. "Granting legal immunity to a person in relation to the noted active investigation, in exchange for their assistance."

"Signed by yourself, the active agent on the case, as well as the Executive Assistant Director for Criminal, Cyber, Response, and Services—who is your superior, Agent Prurnell, is he not?"

Through gritted teeth, she smiles and replies, "Yes, he is."

"Thought so. Your boss' boss, if memory serves. Because any sort of legal protection for a qualified civilian consultant has to go through proper channels. Certainly above *your* head; with all due respect, of course."

She folds her hands primly. Will wonders if it's so she doesn't strike James, or maybe Jack. It's hard to tell who she's more angry with. "Of course."

"So, the Executive Assistant Director thought that any information Will Graham might have on the Ripper was worth granting legal immunity—and I'm sure this was after a thorough background check, to make sure Will wasn't a threat. Which of course can be waived, as the FBI does for gangbangers and mafiosi with active criminal records, but that's neither here nor there, since Will Graham has none. Correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't that the protocol?"

Kade Prurnell's smile leaves her face. "You're a well-informed man, Mr. Deioss."

"It's my job to be." James sits up straight in his chair. Points to a line on the document. "And that's Will's name and signature, as well as the date. It's a legally binding contract that spares Will prosecution regarding any, *ahem,* data breach violations and unauthorized access to crime scenes, I think is how you put it. Putting aside that any and all data given to Will Graham wasn't actually a violation at all, given the parameters of this document, since it was authorized by your boss. And Will gave you a great deal of information, a great deal of assistance, at great personal risk to themselves, and clearly their personal relationship."

Jack has the decency to look stricken at that. Will presses his lips together, lowers his eyes, and does not have to fake it when his breath hitches. He hopes, he *hopes,* but…

"So if Will is protected from these invalid charges, and you have no evidence or plausible reason to support the *other* charges, I think it's in your best interest to avoid a discrimination bias counter-suit to release them at once."

Jack sputters; Kade scoffs loudly, and says, "Mr. Deioss, really, discrimination bias—"

"It's a valid concern, considering Agent Crawford maliciously threw baseless accusations at Doctor Lecter, who has now left the premises without giving my client a chance to defend themselves or talk to their loved one, not to mention the gross mistreatment Will faced when they first arrived—"

"Hah! If you'd like to discuss baseless accusations—"

"I'm sure the video feed would back up my statements. Regardless, Will should be released with haste—"

“We haven’t gotten all the tests back—”

“You have nothing *to* test, you’re reaching, and you’re unlawfully holding my client without credible suspicion—”

Will rubs his hands over his face. Wilhelmina paces within him, restless to chase down their mate, to explain all. God, everyone here is just wasting *time.* It’s not time he has to spare, he needs to get *out,* to find Hannibal—

The door slams open. “—Agent Crawford! Agent Prurnell!”

The room stills. Will lifts his head, and locks eyes with Miriam Lass. Her face is pale, shaken, a tablet tucked in the crook of her arm, screen gone dark. Her eyes, wider than they have any right to be if she had anything even resembling good news.

Will’s fingers curl, nails pressing into the tender flesh of his own cheeks, shoulders drawing inward. His heart drops out. The jacket slips off his back and puddles on the floor in a dull slip of fabric.

“No,” he whispers, and when Miriam winces, he knows.

Kade Prurnell turns a scathing glance on Miriam. “Miss Lass, we’re not finished with this interview —”

“Ma’am, it’s an emergency,” she replies sharply. Licks her lips, her eyes flicker to Will, and away again. “If you could… maybe follow, I could brief you—”

There’s only one thing that would bring her here so quickly, just to pull them out and away from Will. Any other situation, she would tell them here and now. But it’s not any other situation. It’s exactly the one Will expects.

He’s too late.

“He’s gone,” Will says, and his voice breaks. “Isn’t he?”

She doesn’t look at him. Jack Crawford stands, and for a moment, James Deioss looks perplexed. Stunned.

Miriam says, “Yeah.”

“What the hell happened?” Jack demands. “We sent an agent—”

“One agent,” Will scoffs. He feels breathless. His chest squeezes with pain. “One agent against the Chesapeake Ripper?”

All eyes turn to Will, bright with the horror of that statement, and Will wants to laugh. Will wants to cry.

“If the Ripper has Hannibal, Jack…” he whispers, and stops. He can’t breathe. Will covers his eyes with his hands, tucks his chin, and plunges himself into darkness to hide the sting of tears. “I’ll never see him again.”

He’ll take Gideon far away from civilization, both off the radar, and do exactly as he pleases. Take the opening, the easy out, and disappear. Maybe he’ll send for Will when all is said and done, but as long as Gideon goes uncaptured, Will is a witness and they won’t make it easy, especially after this—

“There’s more,” Miriam says.

Will pulls his hands from his eyes. *More?*

“More?” Jack asks, and the tone of his voice is the clear sound of a temper rising. “Who else?”

“Um.” She swallows hard. Lifts the tablet, and unlocks it. “You should see it for yourself, sir. Ma’am.”

“Miss Lass,” Kade Prurnell replies sharply, and reaches up to take the tablet. “That kind of hand-off is not conducive to writing a report or a statement. In the future, you should learn to summarize as much crucial information as…”

Kade looks down at the tablet, and the words die in her mouth. Will knows that expression. Knows it means disaster.

Jack, too, stares in abject horror at the scene displayed on the tablet. The bright white light illuminates their faces in such a way that Will cannot tell whether they go pale, but he knows *he* does.

He sees it upside down, but he knows that color scheme, the bold, accusatory red. The headline, all in caps; the tagline, italicized. And the photograph beneath. Kade tries to pull it up, away, out of his sight, but Will reaches for it. His hand closes around the top corner of the device cover, and he holds it steady.

He needs to know.

“Will,” Jack mutters. He blinks slowly. “It’s not…”

“Show me,” he commands. “I need to see it.”

But when they turn the tablet to him, it’s not what he expected. Not at all.

Two bodies in a bloody room, seated on opposite ends of a worn-in couch like a pair of friends sharing a catch-up chat. Their throats are sliced, tongues pulled through the incisions—faces sliced at the cheek, jaws dislocated and the gaping, terrible mouths exposed to the open air as to make them look inhuman. It’s comical, almost, if it weren’t so horrifying. Both bodies are split at the torso, intestines spilling out and mingling upon the cushions between them. Tangled. Spilled guts.

The red hair of the woman makes her unmistakably Freddie Lounds. And the large stature of the man, the tint of his skin, the color of his hair…

“Local police responded after a reader reported the content of the article. They called us in. We haven’t run DNA, but based on what’s left of their faces, we’ve identified them as Freddie Lounds, and… Abel Gideon.”

“But this looks like…” Jack says slowly.

Four pairs of eyes lift to Will.

His mind races for answers. It only comes up blank.

*What is he doing? What is he **doing?***

“A Ripper kill,” Will whispers. “I… I don’t understand.”

> ***In the Ripper's Shadow*** *— Reporting from the hands of a serial killer! The truth of what happened, and how the FBI missed what was right in front of them.*

But Gideon would have placed the onus for everything on Will. There's no way he would have taken responsibility for crimes that weren't his, not with Freddie fucking Lounds, of all people, unless—

Missed what was right in front of them. The Ripper's Shadow.

It's more than a headline, it's a story to tell.

Will licks his lips. Widens, softens his eyes with confusion, with fright that is not entirely manufactured. And he lies. "I don't—but—" Looks up, and meets Jack Crawford's eyes, then Kade Prurnell's. "But he *told* me he was the Ripper. *He* approached *me."*

"And you never thought to question it?" Jack snaps.

Will bares his teeth, vicious. Honestly unsettled, uncertain. He uses it to his advantage, every single bit of it. "What was there to question? I suspected him, I was looking into it, but then *he* made the final push. He fit the profile, he knew the details! Why would he have admitted to another man's crimes?" Will's fingers whiten, clench around the tablet.

It's a brutal death, a merciless scene. He's filled with the fleeting anger that it was not his own hand that put an end to Freddie Lounds, but—if only to be the selfish, sadistic creature he is, Will hopes Hannibal made her suffer. Made her grovel, the way he is making Will grovel.

Wilhelmina longs to unhinge her jaw and howl, but Will must hold in the screams. There is no mate to cry for anymore. He's on his own.

"Unless," Will says suddenly, sits up straight and widens his eyes, and feels his heart skip in sympathetic gesture to the startled looks he receives in return, "He was told to. The Ripper wanted a pawn. A scapegoat."

"Why would he do that?" Prurnell demands. "That risks exposure. Gideon could have blabbed to anyone at any time."

"No, no." Will rubs a hand over his mouth, drags it down. Shakes his head, almost hysterical. "He's a genius. Gideon probably never knew who he was. Just received the orders and did as he was told. Threatened him, had something on him, it doesn't matter *why Gideon.* It matters why he used a puppet. He wanted to test my loyalty before he revealed himself to me." Honestly, truly, Will's eyes burn and smart. He lowers his head. "And I failed. So he killed Gideon, and he kil—he *took* Hannibal."

No one comments on his stutter. The rawness of it is too much for them to handle, and they ignore it.

"Then why didn't you see it?"

The tears build. Will looks up and meets Jack's accusing gaze. "Why didn't I see it?" He bites out. They cling to his lashes. "Why didn't *you?"*

Jack's lip curls. He turns deliberately away from Will, if only to hide the uneasy way he can no longer look at him. He knows what he's done to Will's life in the scope of a day, and he's too uncomfortable with the reality of his own failure to face it. "Lass, I need Hannibal Lecter's phone records. I want to see his texts, his calls, get the GPS coordinates on his phone and his car. Anything we can use to find him. This is a top priority. Go."

Will releases the tablet. Jack hands it back to her, but the afterimage of the article is still singed on the inside of Will's eyelids; fuzzy, indistinct silhouettes that move between flashes when he's at his most blinded by the residual glow. Human lives reduced to light and color. Memory in motion.

In his mind's eye, he watches every memory he's built with Hannibal all at once, overlapping. Feels every touch against his skin, burning cold enough to make him shudder.

And then hands settle on his shoulders. A jacket, still clinging to warmth, is re-wrapped around his body. "Don't," Deioss mutters quietly. "Don't decide too early what the truth is. You don't know yet."

"I know he left, and now he's gone," Will bites back. "I need to be out there."

"Absolutely not," Kade cuts in. Her jaw is tense, face pale. "If Abel Gideon is *not* the Ripper, that means this case is far from solved, and you're our key witness. We'll put you into witness protection —"

"Because that worked out so well for Hannibal?" Will swallows hard; there's a scream building inside him, perched under his chin. He presses the heels of his hands to his aching eyes. The cold of them almost feels nice, if the rest of his body were not subjected to the chill. The shivers start at his core, radiate outward.

Will drags his hands down, until his fingertips place pressure on his eyelids; tucks his thumbs under the hinges of his jaw, behind his ear, and presses *hard* on the bite Hannibal left him with. Feels the absent weight of his hair, the thin slice along the side of his throat that Mason left him with. He is, all of him, a creature shaped by Hannibal's influence.

It's not over. It can't be over—

A phone rings. Will lifts his head as Kade Prurnell answers. Listens. And all expression drains from her face.

"We're on our way," she says.

A vise closes around Will's heart. He can barely breathe when he whispers, "I'm coming with you."

"Will, no," Jack cuts in. Cuts himself off. He can't seem to come up with a reason why, so he just says, "No, you're not."

Will's jaw clenches. His hands curl together tightly in his lap, wrists still aching from the cuffs. All of him aches. He hates this. It's too much. His body begs for respite from the stress, but there's no relief to be had—not until he knows.

His eyes burn, hot and sore to the touch, salt water scalded. The tides of grief and regret return the pools to his eyes, but he cannot let them fall. Not yet. "I'm *coming* with you," Will says, and his voice cracks. "He'll want me to."

He doesn't specify which *he,* but based on their expressions, they've assumed.

"Call back the forensics team from the Lounds apartment." Kade turns in her seat, and despite her deeply unhappy expression, she gives the order to Jack Crawford. She stands. Deioss follows. But Will can hardly move, hardly breathe when she says, "Redirect all available agents and technicians to Johns Hopkins Hospital."

The ER has been evacuated. In all the time Will has known Hannibal, he has never once seen it even *quiet,* let alone silent.

It's chilling. It looms over the space like a curse, permeating the tile floor and the walls, the stainless equipment and deserted beds. Every step of every agent echoes as they tread the halls with trepidation.

Will's wrapped in an FBI jacket, having given the suit coat back to its rightful owner, but it's still cold; beneath his jacket is a white tee shirt, worn over jeans. Beneath them, he wears the boots Margot gave him, finally returned upon his release. He wore them just hours ago; they should be comfortable. Instead, they pinch—too small for the person contained within them, as though last night had changed Will irrevocably, forever.

But he has changed, hasn't he? Everything has changed. It was enough that no one spoke during the drive. None of them had known what to say, and the silence has persisted until now.

Will wonders if they can hear the way his heart pounds.

There is no blood on the floor, on the walls, on the ceiling. The sterility of it is almost unsettling, compared to the manner in which Abel Gideon had slaughtered his family. But that's always been the Ripper, hasn't it? Controlled to a fault. Disciplined. He decides on a course of action, and does nothing more and nothing less than exactly what he intended.

But Will has no insight into his intent. No idea what he's walking into.

He only knows it's bad.

They pass the Emergency Department, the nurses' stations, the operating rooms. Each, Will cannot help but to peer inside, wondering if there's some secret only he will see. It's an impossible thing to accept, the reality of his situation—incomprehensible that after everything, it meant nothing. He has ended this exactly as he began: alone.

But then they pass a sign made for visitors, a directory board. When he sees the arrow pointing them onward, it clicks.

And Will bolts.

It doesn't matter that his feet hurt, that the agents behind him shout and that there are footsteps barreling after him. Will is smaller, faster, and he's come to know this place better than any of them. He knows which turns to take now that he knows where he's headed.

He barges through the open entryway, through the double doors, thrown open in welcome—and Will makes it halfway down the aisle, past the padded pews, the stained glass windows, the slight slope in the floor. Makes it halfway before he stops, for lack of ability to take even one step further.

The sight of it seizes him around the lungs, around the ribs, rips through his belly. Will's legs give out beneath him, but there is nothing and no one to hold him up.

He kneels before a broken heart, suspended and run through. Beneath the easel of filigree and folded steel that pierces the flesh of this wretched canvas is an altar cloth in the form of a white doctor's coat. A photo identification badge is clipped to the breast, flipped face down.

Will doesn't touch it, doesn't move it, doesn't look at it. Can't.

The world turns upside down. The laws of the universe flip and reverse.

Will's body bends like his spine has been broken. The tide of tears overwhelms him, drowns him. A sound rushes up his throat, and Will's teeth sink into the meat of his fist as he curls in on himself. The taste of iron is thick in his mouth as the sobs shake him down to the soul.

Behind him, the thunder of rushing footsteps stops all at once. He hears someone immediately swear, retch, and retreat. Only one comes forward, and each step pings a monstrous instinct that is known in Will's bones. He curls his arm around his face, the other still clutched and bleeding between his teeth, and touches his forehead to his knees.

Jack Crawford steps around him. Crouches, and there is the muted *click* of plastic as he turns the badge over. Exhales unsteadily, all in a rush. His voice is choked, cracks when he says, "It's Hannibal's." Swallows. "It's Hannibal."

Will lurches, involuntary; a terrible breath bursts from him, a quiet shriek of something pure and raw, and he feels Jack flinch at the sound of it. They all do. They all *should.*

But Will doesn't. His knuckles whiten with trembling strain, his body seizes with aborted electricity. On his knees before this terrible manifestation of a broken body, cut and skinned and twisted, he has seen. Now he knows.

Will hides his face so they can't see it; the blood in his teeth, the salt on his cheeks, the earth-shattering *relief* as he muffles his sobbing laughter.

It's the Three of Swords—reversed.

3:21

Chapter Notes

> HERE WE GO, THE BEGINNING OF THE END. This chapter got EXTREMELY long (like more than 30k) so I decided to split it where it felt natural. This is the first 11k. Keep an eye out later today once I'm done proofreading to get the rest.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will kneels until his knees are numb. Until the laughter building in his throat is swallowed back, pressurized like a weapon within his chest. Tears leak from his eyes, but borne from a relief so keen he can do nothing but weep the excess once it fills him up and he overflows.

I forgive you. I trust you. I will always love you.

And he knows it, soul deep. He does.

But if he's to make it through this in any way that's believable, there is a part of himself that he must *allow* to believe that it's true that Hannibal is gone; some corner of himself that shares space with Wilhelmina, that carves itself a shattered throne within the walls of his mind. It builds itself a crypt of broken dreams and crowns itself in sorrow. It wails and screams and shakes him to the core, and it grows claws: a twisted, sobbing, angry thing, brutally widowed in the worst way possible.

That is the side of himself he must show to Jack Crawford and Kade Prurnell and the FBI. That is what he must make of himself to pull off this charade.

It's so much that Will could burst from it—the reactions that make their way from his mouth, from his body, are the pure and terrible expressions of a mind put under stress too long, finally snapped. A heart pushed to the very limit of what its jagged pieces can take before it's decimated for good.

When Jack tries to move him, Will lashes out like a wild thing because they expect him to. He bares his teeth, his red-rimmed eyes. He hisses out unformed curses, wounded accusations that are sounds but not words. For beside that part of himself that believes he's alone, there lives a facet that runs on auto-pilot under Wilhelmina's and the Ripper's direction. That part of him is always on, and entirely conscious of what he looks like, and how he is perceived. He can feel the air in the room, sense the moods of the people standing behind him just from the way they breathe. It's been a necessary element of his survival, his ambient empathy a fine-tuned skill.

So when their pity has reached its peak, when James places a hand on Will's shoulder and says, "Will, this isn't good for you. Let's take a walk," he does. But he stops in the doorway before Deioss can lead him out, looks back to the body skinned and flayed, cut and twisted, pinned and placed until it took the form of a massive anatomical heart. He looks at the tripod of swords that hold it up, and the lab coat below it. The ID badge that says *Dr. Hannibal Lecter, Emergency Department Staff — Trauma Surgeon.*

The wretched wraith mourns for that body as though it matters. But the analytical side of himself sees it, and sees no dentals. No fingerprints. Will wonders who was chosen to take the place of Hannibal Lecter, to stand in as the body double for this illustration of a love affair gone terribly wrong.

“Don’t look,” James mutters, and even he looks sallow-gray, sickened at the sight. “You don’t need to remember him that way.”

But Will wants to remember him this way *always*. Not as the prey, but as the predator who slaughtered it; not as the display, but as the artist who created it. Too, will it forever be seared in his mind as the most horrible thing he has ever seen, simply for the tangential possibility, in some alternate reality, that this *could* have been Hannibal’s body, if things had been different. “Yes, I do.”

“Will!” Jack stops before them, mouth twisted in a grimace. He looks from James to Will; grits his teeth and sighs. “I understand if you need a minute, but we would appreciate your insight on this.”

Will’s nostrils flare; the wraith gives him all the emotions he needs to show, all the things he would be feeling if this scene were what they believe it is. The love, Will takes and folds it up small, boxes it and hides it like a child tucking toys beneath their bed. It’s not something for a man like Jack Crawford to play with, nor for the wraith to destroy in her rampage.

“My *insight?”* he snarls, and Crawford winces. “What, *what* could I possibly help you with, Jack? You want to pick my brain about how the Ripper killed the person whose crime was loving me and trusting *you?”* Will takes a step forward; Deioss grabs him by the arm, restrains him. Oh, but if this were real, Will would lunge for the throat. No mercy. No forgiveness. If he had lost everything… no, none of them would be standing. “You want me to tell you what he would have done? How he would have skinned Hannibal alive and left his face for last so he could see exactly what was happening? How he would have kept him alive for as long as possible, because it still wasn’t as long as every second of my company he believes Hannibal *stole* from him? Or maybe you want to know how he deliberately placed that ID badge face-down so I would have to live with the torture of turning it over, hoping and dreading that it *wasn’t* Hannibal’s name I would find there? You want my *insight?!”*

That he carved this stranger into the Three of Swords to cause a spectacle so bold that it would buy him time to get away? That he came to Johns Hopkins for more than just the psychological warfare it would wage on everyone involved, myself included?

Jack holds his hands up before his chest, defensive, placating, but Will doesn’t want his pity or his sympathy or whatever else he has to offer. He wants Hannibal.

But the wraith reminds herself she can’t have him, and it’s all their fault.

Will’s voice shakes and his heart beats unsteadily, fueled by the lies he’s allowing himself to believe when he muffles a sob behind his hand and says, “Fuck you. I quit.”

Even when he’s beyond the weight of their eyes, the sting of the wraith’s claws lingers within him. He cannot call her Wilhelmina, for Wilhelmina knows the truth as firmly as Will does. She knows with certainty is happening, and intellectually so does he—but he walks the hospital halls next to Deioss, and knows the fight is far from over. He cannot exorcise this ghost until her job is over and done.

If anyone suspects before the time comes, this won't work. So no matter what he knows, he must tear himself open and allow himself to bleed. The price of his empathy is opening himself up to the horror and the fear, the grief of those around him, and extrapolating it. Absorbing it as his own, under his own circumstances, and allowing it to grow—when in reality, it doesn't exist at all.

Now, of course, it does. And it does because he made it so.

But God, it hurts.

The FBI are nearby, but no one wants to be near a person in the midst of a breakdown quite as demonstrative as the one Will is suffering. They keep a watchful eye, but within the hospital while they're working on this scene, they maintain their distance.

Deioss walks with him to the staff locker rooms, away from prying eyes; it's only when they arrive before them that he seems to hesitate, as though unsure which of the two made available Will'll choose to project his identity upon today. He doesn't have the energy for any of this. He goes into the male locker area, and James follows.

Wordlessly, Will goes to the sink and thrusts his hands beneath the automated stream. He splashes water on his face; for lack of a towel, it drips down his arms, from his elbows, and puddles on the floor. It's quiet enough to hear each drip. Each breath.

Deioss says nothing at first. That suits Will just fine as he attempts to manufacture some equilibrium between the emotional fallout of the lies he's building, and the truth he cannot yet express.

James breaks the silence first. "This is not what I expected from my day."

A bark of laughter rips itself from Will's throat. It hurts, but the tears have gone dry. "Or mine."

"Is he really…?" Deioss doesn't look directly at Will, but his voice is pitched soft. Seeking honesty, but—

"I tried to protect him. I was outmaneuvered," he says. In the mirror, his eyes are shadowed and his stubble is growing in, and nothing about himself is what he wants it to be. With his hair falling just above his shoulders, so much shorter than it used to be, and without the armor his usual wardrobe provides, he just feels… different. But maybe that has more to do with the state of his mind than his state of dress. He doesn't want to think about it enough to figure it out. "And now he's dead."

"Wow." Deioss rubs the back of his neck and stares down into the drain like it has answers. He's questioning his own mortality in the wake of tragedy, rather than mourning; it's natural, Will supposes, after a man as infallible as Hannibal—

But he's not infallible. Nor is he—

"If he's deceased, there are arrangements to be made. All that stuff is in your hands."

A sharp pain starts in the center of Will's chest. What they would do after death is nothing they've ever talked about. He doesn't know what Hannibal would want. He meets James' eyes in the mirror. Tries to smile. Fails. "I don't know if I can handle arranging another funeral."

"I meant the estate. House, car, accounts, et cetera." Deioss puts his hand under the sink, and the automated sensor kicks it on. He wets one hand, and, too, wipes at his face. Shakes his head. Blinks, and takes a breath. Centers himself. And then he straightens up, tall and falsely-confident.

Will envies his composure. It feels like *his* mind is trying to tear itself apart, his heart with it. "Thought that was your job."

"To manage the legal stuff, sure. But the choices are yours."

Will frowns; he turns, looking at Deioss face-to-face. The man frowns at him just the same. "Shouldn't it be up to the bank?"

"Why would it be?" James' brows draw together. "He left everything to you."

Silence. Will's lips part. Eyes widen. It feels like something has its hands knotted in his veins and is pulling, tugging, squeezing his insides. "He *what?"*

Shock crosses Deioss' face. Then incredulity. "I thought it was weird that you weren't there, but he didn't *tell* you?"

Will covers his face with his hands. Shakes his head. Of course he fucking didn't. "When did this happen?"

"Earlier this week. He came in to revise his will and named you the sole beneficiary. Prior to that, he had everything divided between private trusts and charities for the arts. He said he wanted to know you'd be taken care of."

Will swallows hard. No, this is too much. This is too real. To have to balance the FBI, Hannibal's estate; the memory of doing this, interspersed with the fear and uncertainty, the pain and anixety of fucking something up worse than he already has, but *now* he's in charge of everything Hannibal owns? His possessions? The car? His fucking *house?* His shoulders heave; Will presses the heels of his hands against his eyes until it hurts.

"Let's save this conversation," Deioss suggests quietly. "For someplace where *they're* not gonna overhear us talking and get any ideas. Alright?"

Will's head snaps up. The light hurts his eyes, but his lip curls back over his teeth, the primal instincts still bubbling just below the surface of his skin—

Temperance, Wilhelmina says softly, and Will takes a deep breath. He lets it out. Swallows hard. "Okay."

Despite Will's reiteration that he refuses to consult on anything the Ripper does in the future, Kade insists on putting Will under surveillance while he arranges his affairs, leading up to the one thing Will knew was coming: witness protection.

He leaves the hospital with Miriam in tow and Prurnell's promises that they'll have agents watching the house at all times. He has no use for them, given that the Ripper is no threat to him—but every agent following Will is one less available to help them with their investigation. He lets them linger.

And he goes… home.

It seems as though nothing is amiss when Will arrives at Hannibal's house. The Bentley is parked where it always is. The door opens, and the foyer is just the same. But it's dark inside, and it's cold, and the difference is striking; Will stands in the threshold for a while until Miriam's presence at his shoulder is enough to push him onward, inward.

"I'm really sorry, Will," she murmurs.

He swallows. Softly says, "Please don't." The wraith screams and cries for her mate, howling to the ceilings in a way that unsettles even Wilhelmina. But Will cannot allow himself to forget that this, all of it, is just an act. That's all it is. A temporary setback based on a lie—and there is so much more to come. "I'm going to pack."

"Do you want help?"

Will thinks about this for a moment. On one hand, he doesn't want to give Miriam unfiltered access to Hannibal's belongings. But on the other hand, he only has a short window in which to operate, and a great deal to do.

Decided, and absorbing a defeated, exhausted demeanor, he nods. "Yeah, that would… yeah."

"Alright," she agrees softly. "Then just tell me where."

"The study," he replies without hesitation, for that is where the highest concentration of Hannibal's books and significant belongings reside.

And yet, he does not move. The wraith will not allow him to.

"Will…"

Anything to get away from her pity. It makes his skin crawl.

Will heads down the hall. He doesn't wait up.

He boxes the first edition texts, surely not as carefully as Hannibal would, but Will does his best. He packs anything that seems significant—and his own things, which had only just found a home here, along with Hannibal's. The sight of them together and prepped for storage leaves him kneeling in silence, head bowed, eyes burning. Miriam works on around him in silence. If she's noticed his hands stopped moving, she doesn't mention it.

When he comes to the desk, his throat is thick with emotion; he has so many memories of Hannibal seated here, working quietly as Will lay across the couch with his laptop. He remembers himself sitting there, and Hannibal leaning over the back of the chair to rub Will's shoulders, to kiss his neck and pull sighs from his lungs. He remembers the sight of blue satin and lace laid across the surface, the excuse of sparing Margot's dress from wrinkles, when really it was so both of them could take a moment to regain their composure, neither quite able to catch their breath.

He works his way from drawer to drawer, clearing each out as he goes, working from bottom to top. It's only when he reaches the top center drawer, which stretches beneath the desk's surface, much

longer than it is tall, that Will realizes he's never seen Hannibal access this one before. Half-expects it to be locked.

Instead, he finds a folder—black, heavy-weighted stock embossed with gold lettering that says *Deioss & Reveles, Attorneys at Law* .

He knows what it is. Will removes it and sets it on the desk, sitting back heavily in the office chair. For a while, he only stares at the folder, and does not dare to flip it open.

But Will's indecision is decided for him when Miriam finishes with a box and stands, carries it over to place atop a stack of others, waiting to be brought outside. "What's that?"

Will swallows hard. He looks up at her, her sharp eyes, her head cocked with interest. Lowers his eyes to the desk, the folder, and the document within. He clears his throat. "It's his will."

"Oh, shit." She blinks; clearly, it's something she hadn't considered, but seems to internally berate herself for the oversight now that it's occurred to her. Of course Hannibal would be the type of man to ensure his assets were taken care of. "He's kind of young, though, right?"

"Hannibal is exceed— *was* exceedingly practical." The necessary correction kills anything else Will might have said. Having to speak in past tense, allowing himself to suffer to exude the right demeanor… it's grating him to the bone, wearing him down like the tides erode the bluffs that rise high above the sea. "And he saw a lot of death, with his job and everything. Doesn't surprise me he'd be prepared."

"Makes sense," she concedes. Stands uneasily, and when Will offers nothing more, she visibly wrestles with herself over whether or not to ask. Eventually, though, she does. "Do you know…?"

"What it says?" Will asks. At her nod, he tears his eyes away from it, from her, and lets them run along the empty shelves, now barren of books. It's not unlike a winter cold passing through, tearing the leaves and fruit from the trees. Without Hannibal, this house is out of season. Without Hannibal, none of this means anything to him. "Deioss was Hannibal's lawyer. He told me. But I… I've never seen it, myself." Before she can ask, he places his hand on the folder, a tentative touch—his fingers curl and uncurl, slide it along the desk's smooth surface. "If the changes he told me about were real, then he… he left everything to—" Will's voice breaks. "I guess he knew."

Miriam's eyes widen. She blinks, more startled than anything. "Knew?"

"What I would say." Will's voice dies. His throat hurts, and his gaze returns to the desk. To the folder. He opens it.

…last will and testament of Count Hannibal Lecter VIII, as written and modified by the aforementioned and James Deioss, Esquire…

…I hereby entrust the entirety of my estate, my home, and my possessions to Will S. Graham, my dearest love and truest friend; my partner in life, though hopefully not in death. I can think of no one who understood me better, and will know my desires as to distribution of liquid finances and cultural artifacts within my care, and who, in the event of my passing, I would rest more peacefully knowing their future security was certain…

His eyes burn. Will swipes at them with the back of his hand, and when his breath catches with enough force to choke him, he closes the folder again. Pulls it into his lap, against his chest, and holds

it close like if he wished it hard enough, everything else would fade away. That if he wished it hard enough, it would be Hannibal, here; Hannibal, alive—

Hush, sweet thing, murmurs a voice within his mind, and it doesn't sound like the wraith or Wilhelmina, or even himself. It sounds like Hannibal, and Will flinches. *We'll be together soon.*

"He asked me to marry him," Will confesses in a gasp. He squeezes his eyes closed. "Last night. I told him yes. He knew I would."

When Will opens his eyes, Miriam looks stricken. Her lips are parted, tense and sorrowful lines around her eyes. But what can she say? What comfort could she offer in the face of such a revelation? There's nothing—she knows it. Knows Will doesn't want her to try.

"This isn't how today was supposed to go," Will says in a whisper. "This wasn't how *any* of this was supposed to go. I told Jack I would help him to protect Hannibal. I never should have gotten involved. I should have let him send me to jail. Then at least Hannibal might be alive."

Miriam's mouth closes. Her lips press together, a thin, grim line. "You really didn't know, did you? About anything that was going to happen last night."

Will shakes his head. "No. If I'd known how any of this was going to go, I would have told him everything. He wouldn't—" Will's voice breaks, and he forces a tight and terrible smile. "He wouldn't have had a reason to leave. But he did, and I'm going to regret it for the rest of my life."

Miriam breaks eye contact. It's too much for her, guilt by association. Maybe she has a bit of empathy, herself. Will can only hope she escapes the worst manipulations of the agency she's embroiled herself in. They'll eat her if she's not careful.

But then again—he doesn't give a damn what she does.

"The US Marshals are good," she says quietly. "We've never lost a witness before, and they've gone up against worse people than the Ripper. Corrupt cops, the mafia, all that. Serial killers, too. You'll be safe with them."

"I don't care what happens to me," Will murmurs. Slowly, each cell protesting, he lets go of the folder. Lays it across his lap. "Not anymore."

"But Hannibal would care, wouldn't he?"

Will lifts his head. He looks at her. "Yes."

"Then, there you go. If nothing else, you have to hang in there for him. He'd have done the same for you."

Oh, he can imagine what Hannibal would do if this situation were reversed. His solution would be decidedly less… bureaucratic. Will flashes his teeth in a small, fierce smile that is just as quickly tinted by melancholy. But the smile remains.

Miriam, though, takes it as a victory. She relaxes somewhat, consoled by her ability to console.

"You're right," he says in a breath. She is so, so wrong. But she's not entirely wrong.

Whatever else, he has to do this for Hannibal.

“Let’s finish packing,” Miriam prompts him gently. “We’ll get you out of this house, get you somewhere the ghosts aren’t. It’ll get better. Maybe not right away, but it will.”

Somewhere the ghosts aren’t. Will looks around the room and sees a ghost in every empty space—but it’s all the same shape, all the same presence, all the same man who haunts him, and *will* haunt him until they’re together again.

“Okay,” Will whispers, and places the folder on Hannibal’s desk. He lets it go.

He packs most of his wardrobe into the boxes, even what shouldn’t be folded—the red gown, some of his sweaters, other dresses. Packs Hannibal’s wardrobe away, too; at least, the suits Will most likes. Dealer’s choice. In the back of the closet, he finds a set of luggage, and Will takes that too. Packs a large one full of his most generic clothing, for he doesn’t know where they’re sending him.

In his carry-on, Will folds and rolls his father’s jacket and lays it beside two changes of clothing, both masculine and feminine. He packs the most-used, most-crucial elements of his makeup in a quart-sized plastic bag that he scavenges from his own backpack, a remnant from his house; the rest goes into a box. He packs the earrings, though it might be foolish to do. He does the same with the Louboutins, kept for the memories they hold and for the practicality they don’t.

It’s only when he’s combed the bedroom that he realizes Hannibal’s tablet is nowhere to be found, both in the study and their room. Of course, it never left the house, he never used it in front of others—he always seemed the type to be above such things, truth be told, but.

But.

Alone in the room, Will sinks onto the bed and bends until his head rests upon his knees. Such a simple thing, but God, it feels like a blow. It feels like benediction. It’s proof of what he knew, though his mind had been so willing to latch onto the impossible whisperings Will fed it. But this throws those words back in the face of the wraith with bristled fur and bared fangs.

And now…

And now, Will stands. Takes a breath. Rubs his face, weak with relief, with persistent hope, and keeps packing.

And from there, Will goes home. Miriam helps him pack again, but significantly less—after all, Will has less of value to begin with, and most of what he’d cared about had gone with him when he all but moved into Hannibal’s home.

It feels wrong to use the Bentley for anything as menial as moving boxes, but that’s exactly what Will does. Books, clothing, belongings from both of their houses. He’d even taken the china sets, carefully packed with kitchen towels and cloth napkins, and a disassembled suit of what looked like *genuine* armor Hannibal had in the upstairs hallway.

There are things he can't move—his father's gun safe, for one. All of the furniture, of course. But neither of those things are terribly important in the long run. Losing the *Nola* stings, but there's only so much that's possible.

Winston, too, is just not possible.

"I just need to make arrangements," Will says softly to Sarah, and forces a watery smile. He kneels on the floor and presses his face into Winston's ruff, rubs his ears. Of everything, this is by far the hardest part. "I'll give you money for his food and stuff, I know he eats a ton. And I have a friend who might be able to—"

"Don't you worry about that. He's a good boy and I love having him here," she replies, brusque and no-nonsense. "You just let me know. I'm so sorry."

Will stays there until his legs ache. Winston's just happy to see him, of course, and so patient; and hopefully, if everything goes well…

He chokes on his tears. When he finally rises, chest full to burst with pain, with guilt, Winston's neck is damp and Will's eyes are sore. Sarah refuses his money, so he slips enough for at least a few months' worth of food into her coat pocket. It shouldn't take that long, but if it does…

"That's everything," Will grits out as he walks down the driveway, and tells himself he won't look back. "Let's get to the storage place."

He loads all of it in the car and drives to a nearby storage center, indoor and climate-controlled, boasting of 24-hour self service. A fortunate thing, since there's no attendant on duty on Christmas Eve afternoon; Miriam turns her back to keep watch behind them as Will enters his personal information, selects a twelve month lease period, and enters his credit card.

They unload. The unit is small, no larger than ten by ten, and the boxes take most of that. It's hard work; Will's muscles protest at the strain. He likes to think it would help him sleep well tonight. He knows better.

"I really don't think it's a good idea—"

"Kade said they could do one night," Will murmurs as they exit the unit and shut the draw-down door. It locks with an automatic key code. Fortunate. Easy to convey to another for ease of access. "The threat is credible, and I guess I'm considered a crucial witness, so federal funding is approved. James is supposed to come over this evening to help me go over the legalities of the house and the car and the…" He swallows. Tries again, and thinks it aches a little less. "The funeral arrangements."

"Still," Miriam insists, "He can come to a safehouse. It's just, it's a big place, Will; a lot of entry points to cover. If he's gonna come for you—"

"He won't." He's halfway across the world by now. "Not tonight, anyway. He doesn't want to overplay his hand, wants me to think about it, to somehow see he was right, and just… get over what he did. He's okay with giving me space when he's trying to win me back. Tomorrow, though, after I shut everything down—that's when he'll realize. And when he sees I'm gone, that's when all hell will break loose."

Her expression is grim in the afternoon light, sandy-blonde hair dyed by the red bleeding into the sky. "Noted."

He looks at her sidelong, and in among her pinched expression, he sees the source: she's worried for him. Her sensitivity will backfire on her at some point if she's not careful—Will doesn't intend her harm, but someday, a different enemy might.

But before he can say anything, her phone buzzes. Miriam takes it from her pocket, unlocks it, and after a moment, her expression goes entirely blank.

Will's heart seizes. "What?" He asks.

She lets out a long, slow breath. "DNA's back."

Will grits his teeth. Stares at her. Says nothing, and neither does she, until—

Miriam turns, reaches out, and pulls Will into a hug. "I'm really sorry, Will."

The wraith exhales, shivers, shudders— *He's gone, he's gone, he's gone—*

But Wilhelmina purrs. Her claws curl in the back of Miriam's shirt, so smug, so satisfied as she grips at the shoulders of an FBI jacket and feigns unsurprised agony. *He did it.*

God, after everything, he can't afford to get cocky, to think that this'll go smoothly; there's no reason to celebrate. This war within him will go on until the very end, but despite everything, they're winning. *They're* winning.

That evening finds Will seated at the head of the dining room table, hands folded primly in his lap. He itches idly at the stubble growing in on his cheeks and jaw; at least he's reasonably comfortable in the clothes Hannibal had made for him all that time ago, the same soft, blue button-down and gray slacks. He can still *just* manage to tie his hair back, though with the roughness on his face, he looks. Well, he looks like a hipster, but at least it's a passably male look when dressed correctly.

The surface is covered in papers, paperwork, a thousand things to sign, disclosures, waivers, et cetera; it's enough to make his head spin. "I want to liquidate everything that's left."

Deioss still looks shaken, wary—but that catches his attention. *"Everything?"*

"Yes. And I want it put away. I can't use accounts with my name or Hannibal's name while I'm in witness protection. I need them to be under anonymous sources that I'll be able to have unconditional access to, including international access."

"International?" His eyes narrow slightly, brows drawing together.

"I don't know where they'll send me," Will replies. "Apparently the US Federal Marshals have a good relationship with Canada and the European Consulate; Miriam said in extreme cases, international relocation isn't out of the question. And this is nothing if not extreme."

Deioss sits back in his chair. He stares evenly at Will, looking for… something.

Will, for his part, rubs at his face again, then his eyes. They still sting. "I can't live in this house without him," he admits softly. It's certainly not a lie; this place holds none of the warmth without

Hannibal here, and if that's what it's coming down to, he doesn't want to remember the house this way, either. "I drove his car for the first time today and it felt like I was stealing it. Everything he's invested in is here, and I have no way of knowing what to pay attention to—and the likelihood they'll let me stay in contact with you to sort it out is next to nothing. I thought about it a lot. This was the best I came up with."

James' lips press together; clearly not pleased, but nor can he fault Will's logic—and he's unhappy he can't fault it. There's a part of him, large or small, that suspects. Will suspected he might; the damning combination of a sharp mind and a close personal knowledge of Hannibal Lecter.

He may protest. He may not.

James drums his fingers on the table. His other hand is pressed flat to the paper he was working on prior to Will's announcement, now forgotten. "Moving money into private sources is smart. Perhaps an offshore trust, or an LLC. That's what all the cool kids on Wall Street are doing nowadays. Panama Papers and all that."

"And all that," Will repeats. He gives no indication whether he agrees or disagrees, except the arched brow when he continues, "But surely redistributing the finances of someone going into witness protection doesn't fall under Panama Papers territory."

"No, of course not," Deioss agrees mildly. "It's just a happy accident that both would be sheltered from any particular jurisdiction, if ever the holder of those accounts was to get into trouble."

Smart man. "A good thing, then, that I don't plan on getting into trouble."

"All due respect, Will, but you didn't plan on last night, either." Deioss folds his hands. He leans forward, takes a breath. Doesn't speak for a moment, until—"Physical possessions left in an individual's name, though, would not have the same protection."

The very corners of Will's lips tip upward. "Yet another good thing that you're not the only person I know who believes in the power of discretion." His teeth feel sharp in his mouth; he bites back a smile, maintains his calm. "And the value of it, for that matter."

Deioss huffs an incredulous breath—but he doesn't look surprised. "This friend of yours who believes in that sort of discretion must owe you a rather sizable favor."

"That's between me and my friend," Will replies coolly. "Who wants to ensure my safety and wellbeing in this difficult, dangerous time. I hope you'll feel the same."

James blinks slowly. Viper-green eyes, Will remembers having thought. Yes, that seems about right. "Your wellbeing is dear to a great many people, I'd imagine."

"Just a few. But those that care feel strongly, as I'm sure you know." Oh, this is fun; the wraith is temporarily silent in her wailing, and Wilhelmina is free to run wild, stretch her muscles. Here in this room, in this company, she can show herself. She's been gearing up for a long chase for a long time, after all. So much prey, so little time. Together, they have yet to decide whether this man is friend or foe. "I won't ask for your loyalty, just your silence. If… someone comes after me, someone who's a threat, I wouldn't ask you to do any more than I've done today."

"By *someone,* you mean… the Ripper." Deioss raises a brow. He is *clearly* not speaking about the Ripper. "And by *what you've done,* you mean say nothing at all."

“Exactly,” Will agrees. Plausible deniability, after all. “But I’m not unreasonable. I won’t ask you to lie for me, just to stay quiet; you don’t know me that well, and frankly, I don’t know you. I just know that Hannibal trusted your discretion.”

“Hannibal wasn’t doing *anything,* that I knew about.”

“Neither am I. But you wouldn’t have been surprised if he had, nor were you surprised when faced with the possibility that *I* had. Yet, he never faced any accusations, or even any implications. Just a polite and pointed enforcement of professional boundaries, which is something he respected.”

Will, too, leans forward. Wilhelmina, eager and assured, brushes up against his consciousness, a wolf in the woods, a big cat in the sun. He knows it the moment James sees her; a light in his eyes, equal and opposite to their own.

“I know the only reason you’ve been as transparent with me as you have is because you saw me as the lesser of two evils. But I’m not lesser. As of tomorrow morning, it’s pretty likely you and I will never see each other again. I trust your self preservation instinct, Mr. Deioss, and your self-fulfilling nature, so I’ll tell you: no one got the details right, but I’m exactly what they thought of me—and you hide what you are well, but you’re the same as I am. You’d be willing to do what you had to when it comes to protecting your family, but I’m not looking to fuck you over after you helped me. My goal is to slip as quietly off the radar as possible. If you let me let that happen, you’ll have the gratitude of myself and those who care about me. I have it on good authority that there’s a powerful family under new management that’s looking for a new lawyer to keep on retainer. You said your job description was making sure the *right* people win. I think they’d be very interested in that particular skill set.”

For a while, James sits in silence. Will is content to let him—there’s a lot to go over in his mind, surely. Weighing the options. But Will knows he’s the best one.

Finally, a resigned look flashes through his eyes; the set of his shoulders in no way changes, but Will reads the change there like it’s written plainly. He’ll maintain his bravado, surely, as an attempt to play hardball. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately for Deioss, Will isn’t playing. He’s winning.

“I want five million,” Deioss says firmly, no nonsense.

Will inclines his head. “I’ll give you ten. Call it a gesture of good faith.”

And *that* takes the wind out of his sails; all at once, Deioss seems to realize exactly what’s happened. Now the resignation sets in.

“It can’t come through me, of course—after you set up the accounts, I’ll arrange everything with Margot. You take her offer, it’ll come in the form of a sign-on bonus for your new position through Muskrat Farm Incorporated. Tie everything up with a neat little bow.”

“What about you?” he asks. “Where will you go?”

“I don’t know,” Will lies. He turns his attention down to the table, wistful; the spread of paperwork, the many tethers tying him to this life. Soon, they’ll all be severed.

James takes a breath. Slowly exhales, then, “Are you sure this is what you want? Slipping quietly off the radar, as you say, isn’t going to go the way you seem to think it will. People are going to come after you. Lots of people.”

Will widens his eyes in a play at innocent confusion as he looks up at Deioss. “I’m only worried about the Ripper coming after me. Miriam ensured me that witness protection is extremely safe.”

James’ expression darkens; clearly, he doesn’t appreciate being taken for a fool, even if it’s necessary he knows nothing about Will’s plan. “So safe that Hannibal died under their care, is that right?”

The barb stings, but Will doesn’t flinch. After all, the wraith in his mind can shift and pace all she wants, but Wilhelmina is bigger and stronger than she is. And so is Will. “That’s right,” he murmurs. Takes a breath. Lets it out. “And I would give up everything if I could have him back.”

“Is that right?”

Will stares at him. Meets James’ eyes and holds them until his face changes, until he can see the conviction; the absolute surety that Will would choose Hannibal any time. Every time. “Without hesitation.”

He’s silent for a time. Then, with a slight nod and a diversion of his attention down to the papers before them, Deioss acquiesces. “It’s not in my power to undo what’s been done,” he says. “But I can do what we’ve agreed on. I’ll get as much set up as quickly as possible. Let me show you what I need, and I’ll get out of here and get to work.”

Will picks up a pen. It’s cool between his fingers. “Just tell me where to sign, and if everything goes the way it should, I’ll never have a reason to call you again.”

“And if everything doesn’t do the way it should?” he asks. His tone is light, brow arched, but there’s a darkness in his eyes, a quiet and ominous sense of dread.

And Will replies, soft with warning, “Then we’ll cross that bridge when we get to it. But I wasn’t responsible for my failure the first time—Abel Gideon was. And now he’s dead.”

The lines around Deioss’ eyes tighten. He agrees solemnly, “And now he’s dead.”

When the house is empty and quiet, when Deioss has gone and the leading FBI agent reports to the door and says the house is secure and that they’ll be there if Will needs anything—that is when he leaves.

Not in any way they’ll know about; the tunnels under the house and under the city are enormous and vast, but there’s a path marked by white chalk X’s that starts in the basement and leads outward. It takes him perhaps fifteen minutes to reach the exit; an old storm drain that emerges in a wooded area, a place where a stream runs through and there are tire tracks worn into the ground. Not recent ones, but recently enough that Will knows with certainty that this is likely where Hannibal stashed his transport vehicles.

Tonight, though, there is a car parked up on the distant ridge. Its headlights are off, but there is a subtle cloud of steam from the exhaust that tells Will it’s on.

He climbs up the ridge. Gets in the passenger side. Is immediately enveloped by a crushing embrace.

“God *damn,* Graham,” Margot hisses. “You scared the shit out of me.”

“It’s not like I planned on all this,” Will mumbles into her shoulder. For a woman with an arm that’s still technically broken, Margot is alarmingly strong. He hugs her back just as fiercely. “You got out okay?”

“Yeah. They’re not investigating the house anymore. Daddy thought I was going to see Alana, and he doesn’t want to know, so he didn’t ask.”

Will rubs her back; she sags into his grip over the center console, and it’s not comfortable, but it’s damn comforting for both of them. Will breathes the scent of her shampoo, the scent of the barn clinging to her boots. Scents that remind him of family and home—even though he has no home to speak of, anymore.

“Did you bring it?”

Will nods. Finally, they break apart, and he settles into the passenger seat. Digs in his pocket, and takes out a slip of paper bearing a four-digit PIN. He passes it to her. “This is the code to the storage unit. I need you to have everything taken out of it as soon as possible and relocated somewhere secure. I paid a year in advance, so they won’t suspect anything’s wrong until they get in and find out they’re empty. No security cameras, no reason to fall back to you.” Will swallows hard; it’s a strange thing, to know with such finality that everything is coming to a swift and decisive end. “I have another favor to ask.”

She tilts her head, but nods; no questions asked. She trusts him now, more than she ever did before. After all, they’re finally bound by blood.

“I left Winston with Sarah,” he says. From his pocket, he takes a key—the one to his house in Wolf Trap. He hands it over. “And I left the *Nola* in the barn. There’s no paperwork on the boat, no one except Hannibal ever saw it.” Will inhales slowly through his nose. Exhales. “Repaint her, rename her, whatever you want. I’d just rather know she’s on the water than sitting in there until she rots. Go out on the bay with Alana once in a while. Take Winston with you. He grew up on that boat, he knows how to behave. He can live in the barns; he won’t bother the barn cats or the piglets, he’s not aggressive—”

“I’ll pick him up,” she assures him. “We’ll get him situated comfortably in one of the heated areas. Daddy won’t allow him in the house, but I see the horses every day. I can set him up in there.” Her lashes lower, a distant, gentle melancholy. “And maybe when the time is right…”

“Don’t get my hopes up,” Will murmurs. He sits back in the seat, and closes his eyes. To think that it might be so easy… “I just needed to get out from under the FBI. I don’t really have a plan beyond that.”

“Do you really think I’m stupid?”

Will opens his eyes. Blinks. Turns to her, head tilted. God, but his face itches; he scrubs his hand over the new growth and narrowly resists digging his nails in. “What?”

“Will,” Margot says solemnly. “I would hope after everything we’ve done, you don’t feel like you have to lie.”

Will sits in silence. Even Wilhelmina is still. He says nothing; of *course* he has to lie. What does she mean, not lie?

Margot reads this on his face; she scoffs, nose wrinkled, and sits back heavily in the driver's seat. "Unbelievable." Scowls. "Hannibal called me."

He can't help it—Will twitches. Her eyes snap to him in the dim, and they're sharp.

"He called me and told me exactly what I needed to do to get you freed. I sent the manifesto email FBI is using as evidence against the Italians. Then I went to my father and told him I had the hit ordered on Mason."

"You did *what?"* Will snaps incredulously. "He could have had you arrested!"

"Hannibal said that in the absence of an heir, he'd never do that. And that my father would respect my initiative, because I showed some. And he was right—weirdly enough, I think he was proud of me." Her face glows from the inside, lit with fire and fury. Will takes a breath and sits back to watch her burn. "He's buying off the investigation. The postmortem examiner, the agents, all of them. It's a drop in the bucket compared to the PR scandal of having one heir murdered and the other sent to prison. He knows I had a good reason, and he knows *you* had a good lawyer. He agreed to bring Mr. Deioss onto staff. But all of that was after Hannibal called me. I think I might've been the last call he made. And then, next thing I knew, they found the van all fucked up and that agent ripped open inside it, the bloodstains. But I knew."

Will doesn't move. Doesn't ask. Wants to know. Doesn't want to know. *Knew what?*

"Hannibal didn't argue your innocence like an innocent man would. He just told me if I got you freed, you'd know what to do. And a few hours later, they found his body. But instead of absolutely losing your shit like I *know* you would have if you really thought he was gone, here you are… knowing exactly what to do, just like he said you would." She glances at Will, sidelong. She doesn't look… angry, per se. Just irritated. Will's teeth click together as he slowly shuts his jaw. "Then Doctor Gideon showed up dead, and Freddie Lounds, conveniently while you were still in custody. You don't have that many friends, Will—Hannibal would have been a suspect for those murders, but then *he* ended up dead, body disfigured beyond recognition, identified only by the records kept at the hospital he worked at, which he had access to. And therein lies the great mystery of the Ripper's identity, hinging on the fact that you were wrong about everything. But you've never been wrong about him. And you're obviously holding together pretty well. You packed up your stuff *and* his, and we're hiding it from the FBI, and you asked me to send it to you secretly once you get *settled.* Which really only brings me to one reasonable conclusion: Hannibal's alive, and he's the Chesapeake Ripper, and you're gonna dodge witness protection so you can go find him, because you love him. And because he loves you."

No, she's certainly not stupid.

Will's lips part, but he says nothing. What can he say? There isn't anything. Certainly no more lies he could plausibly pull off, and that leaves only the truth. Except the truth is too big and too terrifying to admit to, but—

"Are you mad at me?" Will asks softly.

She doesn't reply at first. It's the most tense handful of seconds Will's ever experienced, until finally, she sighs. She shakes her head. "No."

"Scared of me?"

“No,” she says again. “I’ve known you a long time. You’ve always been *like this,* Will. Honestly, thinking anyone like Hannibal could come along and change you…” she trails off into silence. “No. Not scared. I grew up with Mason. And I don’t exactly have the moral high ground, since you helped me kill my brother and feed him to his pigs.”

Will privately thinks there’s a *lot* of moral high ground to be had in killing one’s abuser over a man who systematically hunts and cannibalizes the rude, but for the sake of his relationship with Margot, he’s not about to point it out. “I was glad to do it,” he murmurs. “Even with the way all of this happened, I’d do it again.”

That surprises her. “Would you?”

“Yeah,” he says honestly. “Of course, if I could change things, I’d tell Hannibal what was happening —”

“He didn’t *know?”*

“I *told* you he didn’t know!”

“And when I thought he was a normal person, I believed you! You seriously didn’t tell him—”

“What would I have said?! *Hey, so actually I found out you’re a serial killer, but it’s fine, I’m not worried about it, want to help me kill someone?”*

“He would have said yes!”

“Of course he would have said yes!”

They sit in silence for a shocked moment, both of them staring at one another, before—

Margot laughs. She laughs so hard it shakes her body, laughs so hard she snorts and wheezes, and Will laughs with her. It’s infectious, shaking him to the core, and after everything, it feels like release. Like victory.

Nothing went the way it should’ve, but they won.

And Will is leaving. Forever.

The realization is sobering, hard-hitting, and suddenly Will’s breath has left him for an entirely different reason. He sits in silence at Margot’s side as the hysterics slowly leave her, and in the dark dim of the car, he turns to her. Looks at her. “Do you think we’ll ever see each other again?”

“I know we will.” And she says it with such conviction that Will nearly believes her. Maybe he does. He’s not really sure, truly. “Once you’re settled, wherever you are. I’ll charter a plane or a ship, and as long as your boyfriend doesn’t kill me, I’ll come see you.”

“Fiancé,” Will corrects automatically, thoughtlessly, and they both freeze. “Um. He won’t. Kill you.”

Margot sucks in a breath. “Will Graham, so help me—“

“I swear it only happened last night—”

“I knew I was right! I *knew* it and you thought I was nuts and I was absolutely right, you stubborn bitch. Tell me everything right now. Otherwise I’m not letting you out of this car and you’ll miss your

flight—”

“Alright, alright!” Will snaps, but the heat is gone from it. He’s laughing too hard. His ribs ache, but for all different reasons.

Most of all, he’s going to miss her.

Inhale. Exhale.

In the silence, she reaches over the center console and takes his hand—and Will knows that in matters of the heart, like everything else, they share a size.

When the dawn breaks, just before the FBI converge upon his doorstep to escort him onward, Will opens the page for *Abnormal Analysis* and takes it all down.

He’s archived it for his own purposes, but it will never again exist for public use. And hopefully, no one will notice until tomorrow, once the holiday is over and done with, and once Will is… hopefully, safely *far* away from all of this.

But on the error page his readers will find stating that the site has been removed, a simple gray screen, Will hides a comment in the source code. It’s not a link, since his site is gone now, no other pages to be found. Just a comment hidden beneath the body text, invisible to the naked eye.

< !-- I’ll see you in the sky. -->

Jack drives him to the airport in the morning. In the back of the blacked-out SUV is one suitcase, one carry-on. Generic, black. No luggage tags, bearing no phone number and no address. No name, but for the designated fake initials from his checked baggage tag that gets secured around the handle in the lobby. Jack stands behind him as Will hands it over to the steward and sends it down the conveyor belt.

“You don’t have to hover,” Will says softly. At the FBI’s request, he’s wearing generic jeans and a tee shirt, hair pulled back and covered by a knitted cap. With the stubble growing in along his cheeks, he’s practically unrecognizable to himself, let alone anyone else. “Taking the site down won’t ping an alert since it wasn’t a new page. We have time.”

“Forgive me for being cautious,” Jack grumbles. He looks like the type of man who would much rather be clinging to a cup of coffee right about now. Will echoes the sentiment.

“You’re cautious enough. I’m meeting the air marshal at my gate, then witsec once I get off the plane. I’ll be on cameras basically everywhere I go. There’s nothing to worry about.” Will extends the handle of his rolling carry-on, and adjusts the strap of his laptop case over his shoulder. It’s been

cleaned of glass, the laptop not yet replaced—instead, there is a bluetooth-connected mobile keyboard, with which he can sync his phones and have full accessibility. It's small, lightweight, convenient. And hidden in the lining where it resides is Will's second passport.

The first, given to him by Jack in the car, bears his fabricated identity that he'll live under with witness protection. Or so they believe.

Crawford scoffs quietly; after all the trouble Will has caused him, he can hardly blame Jack for being skeptical at the words *nothing to worry about.* Will's been something for everyone to worry about since day one. "Forgive me if I respectfully disagree."

Will dutifully ignores him. "Then you can follow me to security and watch me go through, if it makes you feel better."

"I'll feel a lot better when we have the Ripper in custody."

The wraith's howling is barely a whisper. Beneath Will's skin, the wolf waits. "No fucking kidding." Jack follows Will's footsteps on his way to TSA. It's only when they're on the near side of the glass that Will says, "Don't you think sending me home is a little obvious?"

"Wasn't up to me," Jack replies, but his tone says that he agrees. If Will really *were* fleeing the clutches of a serial killer, he'd be far from comforted at that tone. Maybe Jack sees the thought on his face, because he follows it up with, "But I have every faith in the Federal Marshals. They know what they're doing."

"Then maybe you should have sent Hannibal with them," Will snaps. Flinches, like he himself is the one stricken by the false reality that slips so easily from his tongue. His head drops. Jack's shoulders slump.

"Will…" Will doesn't look up at him. "I'm sorry about what happened. It shouldn't have gone like that."

"You're right. You should have trusted me." He presses his lips together; takes the passport from his pocket, and smooths his fingers over the pages. They feel worn, the spine more than a little broken. For what it's worth, the marshals seem to have created Will a well-traveled identity. The reverse could not be more true. He's been on a plane only once before, when Beau had moved them to Wolf Trap. His real passport, though nearly (but not quite) expired, feels much newer.

Jack frowns at him. "You don't make it easy to trust you, sometimes."

"Whether or not you believed what I said was on you, not on me." He takes a breath, something sharp and unhappy as he looks away, toward the looming TSA agents. "And yet, I'm the one who paid for it. Dearly. I don't want your trust, Jack. I want Hannibal back."

His forehead creases with a complicated expression, something reserved and regretful all at once. "If I could give him to you—"

"But you can't," Will says with finality. "So do me a favor, and don't send me the autopsy report. Don't tell me about the investigation. Let me get on with my life, go somewhere far away, and never think about any of this shit ever again."

"Then I guess this is goodbye."

“I guess it is.” At long last, Will looks up at him. Meets his eyes, and doesn’t do much to hide the pain that permeates every cell in his body at Hannibal’s absence. He lets Jack see it. He needs to see it. It’s the closest he’ll come to knowing the truth—for a while, anyway. His last moments looking at Jack Crawford, Will wears the disguise of one brutally disfigured by the scars Hannibal left him. “Goodbye, Jack.”

Jack’s expression, too, is solemn. “Goodbye, Will. Good luck out there.”

Will nods, just once.

This time, luck has nothing to do with it.

He crosses the glass. Jack stays behind, watches from the other side as Will winds his way through TSA, clears the scanners without fuss. He is, after all, unarmed and free of contraband. But there’s still a lump in his throat until he rounds the corner out of Jack’s sight, as he wanders and assures himself that they really did exactly as they said they would, and no one is currently following him—

There’s no one following him.

Will detours to the restrooms, and slips into the family-accessible single stall. Flips the lock.

And breathes.

Fuck. He really…

He’s gone, he’s gone—

Will kneels and unzips the flap on his carry-on. Removes the still-sealed disposable razor, and goes to the sink. The wraith stares out at him from inside his eyes in the reflection. Will bares his teeth. “Shut up.”

It’s not an easy thing, but he’s well-practiced; Will shaves the stubble from his face with the lather from hand soap and water, and rinses the shed hairs down the drain. Covers the remnants quickly with the small travel compact of foundation, stuffed into a quart-sized plastic ziploc. Shapes his brows with a pencil, and combs the pigment through. Applies eyeliner, then swipes the wand from the tiny tube of mascara through his lashes.

He lets his hair down. Wets his hands, and does his best to style it. And then he strips from his jeans and tee shirt, wiggles into the soft bralette and lace panties, the long black sweater and the houndstooth-print leggings. Trades his sneakers for the Louboutins, tucked inside his carry on—and removes the roll of hundreds from where it was stashed inside one elegantly pointed toe.

Will repacks his carry-on. Disposes of the razor in the trash beneath a layer of paper towels. Puts the cash in his laptop bag, alongside his original passport. He’s sure he’ll turn heads in security, but really, could it really be any worse than what he goes through every day?

He exits the bathroom. And with his head held high, with practiced steps, he turns right around with his bag rolling behind him, and walks out of the domestic terminal in a crowd of new arrivals.

And in the lobby, he finds the waiting group for a transit, and takes it. When he reaches the international terminal, he walks quickly, as one might when they’re in danger of missing an important connection, and takes on the affectation of his most darling southern drawl.

“Excuse me,” he says at the desk, “So sorry to bother. But I had this ticket for tomorrow, and I’m hoping I can move my reservation—I’m okay with paying, I swear, but my fiancé’s had a family emergency and I need to get to him as soon as possible.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” says the stunned attendant; she taps away at her terminal, pulling up records and flight numbers—she looks down at the ticket and looks up at Will, confused. “Sorry, but this ticket is registered to William S. Graham.”

Will ducks his head. He can feel his cheeks color, and offers a slight, embarrassed nod. “I, uh. Usually go by my middle name, Shannon.”

Fortunately, the woman seems to understand at once. She offers an encouraging smile as she redirects her attention to the screen. “Of course, so sorry about that. Let me see what I can find…” Her brow creases, but swiftly smooths. “There’s a flight leaving in about an hour. I’m afraid if you have a checked bag, we have a two-hour policy—”

“I don’t,” Will replies quickly. No, his checked bag is doomed, lost to the airport in Louisiana where it will surely languish until the marshals pick it up. It doesn’t have anything of value in it, anyway. Instead, he wiggles the handle of his rolling case. “Just my carry on and a personal article.”

“Oh!” A flurry of clicks, and an apologetic look. “Well, it looks like there’s still room available; it’ll be an upcharge of about seven hundred from your First Class ticket, which will actually bump you *down* to Business. But if you’re willing—”

Will’s heart clutches, flutters, and he smiles with such keen relief—“I’ll take it.”

Will’s skin crawls with anxiety as he goes through security a second time, as he’s pulled aside and mortifyingly patted down (though he’s far from mortified, of course; all in all, the agent seems more embarrassed than he, especially when her eyes catch sight of the bite mark scar that was better hidden when his hair was longer). As he rushes through the terminal toward the gate—

He has twenty minutes to board this plane and be gone before anyone *notices* he’s gone. But as he hurries by the shops, the boutiques, a flash of color catches his eye, and Will stops.

Turns. Looks. Thinks.

And, well.

He walks into the upscale boutique, to the glass case, mind made up, and stares down at the contents within. He remembers the many nights he’s spent tangled in Hannibal’s embrace, the times their hands have woven together like the limbs of one greater, fiercer creature. In his mind, he measures the size of his hands, the width of his fingers. He traces the tip of his thumb across the base of one of his own, and imagines what it would feel like to feel it encircled by warmth. To feel that warmth against his skin in turn.

He points. “That one, please.”

When he's on the plane, but not yet moving, that's when the panic starts to set in. He shrinks in his seat as each person passes, head turned to look out the window, but hair falling into his face to obscure the view of him from the ground. There's simultaneously too much room in his seat, but also not enough. Will takes his father's jacket from his carry on and pulls it around his shoulders, a comfort blanket not nearly so effective as the one he's longing for, *howling* for—

He's gone, he's gone, he's gone.

He's not gone. He's not.

If the wraith is a screaming void, Wilhelmina is a snarling, desperate thing. She knows her territory and will defend it at all costs—and Hannibal is her territory. The wraith has long overstayed her welcome.

But she's left her mark, hasn't she? Her despair, her rage, her fear has filled crevices of Will's aching chest more than he'd like to admit. Though her complete lack of faith may or may not be completely unfounded, a more pressing and valid concern raises its head. *What if he's not there?*

Because he might not be. There are so many things that could have gone wrong with this; Will could have read the signs wrong, misunderstood Hannibal's intent. There's every possibility that he'll get there and find himself abandoned, alone. He doesn't want to think Hannibal would do that to him, but he's concurrently sure there's many things Hannibal, too, did not expect from Will that have already come to pass. He can only do all that he's done, and Will hopes the tithe and the penance paid are seen rewarded by absolution.

But.

If what he finds when he gets there is an empty room, devoid of the beloved he's fought and killed for… Will knows now that he won't allow that to be their end. Hannibal may abandon Will to whatever the Fates would make of their broken love, chained to the mast of this bridge while the cables snap and the concrete crumbles. Maybe he thinks he can leave Will behind to face the consequences *without* consequence.

But if that's the case, he's in for a rude awakening. Wilhelmina has been prowling inside him since childhood. And though he's sure that Hannibal has existed always exactly as he is, the Ripper, in the state that Will knows him, is far younger.

Will lifts his head; something locks into place. No, it's not over. One way or another.

The plane door closes, and as they push back into the aisle and taxi toward the runway, Will closes his eyes, and for a moment retreats into his mind. The shape of the halls there, the arrangement of the rooms, all remind him keenly of Hannibal's house.

In the air is a terrible wailing that drowns out the sound of sizzling pans, of harpsichord's keys, of soft breaths and the rustle of sheets. But Will knows this house, and he knows what he's looking for. He finds the wraith in the shadowed corners of the basement, slinking between motes of dust. She doesn't fight when Will comes for her—after all, he *made* her. And he can destroy her.

He breaks her neck. She falls silent, and Wilhelmina snarls, triumphant. The wheels leave the ground. Will opens his eyes.

“Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for joining us today on our Christmas Day direct jet from Washington DC to Palermo, Italy. Our trip is expected to last eleven hours and twenty minutes. On behalf of Alitalia and all the members of the Star Alliance group, we’d like to wish you a pleasant flight.”

Will spins the band around his finger, a touchstone in motion. It slips easily, smoothly, far too large, but that’s just fine. It’s not for him.

It catches the light as it comes through the window, as the city disappears below. Trees. Towns. Tiny, matchbox cars. People smaller than ants, not a single one of them important in the grand scheme of life—but one of them, very far away, of crucial importance to Will’s.

Maybe everything will be easy. Maybe it won’t be. But one thing is for certain, and that’s that Will is completely and totally unwilling to settle for anything short of victory.

I named you. I found you. I claimed you. And if you run, I’ll hunt you.

Chapter End Notes

I've had this song in mind for a long time when I thought of this chapter. Please enjoy it in the meantime while I finish up Part Two, where I will surely be dumping all my emotions on y'all.

3:22

Chapter Notes

So, where do I begin?

Thank you to everyone who has gotten this far, who came along for the ride while this was updating. I wouldn't have made it here without you. Thank you to the friends who encouraged me, to my wife HigherMagic who inspired me, and to Dommi who is directly responsible for this monstrosity for sending me a fancy Baltimore restaurant menu in April of last year when I was just getting started and blowing my whole plan to bits.

It's been almost a year and a half on the dot of this emotional roller coaster. It's been the best writing experience of my life, and I'm not sure I'll ever do anything I love this much again. So, really. Thank you all. It's been a hell of a ride.

ALSO: THIS IS A TWO-PART CHAPTER. PLEASE MAKE SURE YOU READ THE LAST CHAPTER AS WELL BEFORE PROCEEDING. THANKS. ♥

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The airport is nearly empty; getting a cab, almost impossible. Will's not surprised, since it's Christmas Fucking Day in arguably one of the most Catholic countries known to the modern world. And, of course, nothing can be easy. The cabbie he manages to snag is older, grouchy, clearly unhappy to be ferrying strangers around on a holiday, despite the pay—but he seems somewhat appeased when Will recites his destination in broken, unpracticed Italian.

"Per favore portami alla Cappella Palatina. Grazie."

Of course, the exorbitant tip certainly can't hurt.

Will's not dressed for the weather. He's got couture clothes, Louboutins, and his father's hunting jacket; snowflakes drift idly down, and the cobblestone road is wet and slick. His toes are freezing. His hair is a mess. His nails are bitten to the quick, and just staring up at the enormous, austere chapel, his eyes burn with such ferocity that he wonders whether he's going to pass out or cry. Maybe both.

He's never seen anything like it. Ever. He thinks that from the outside, and then he climbs the steps and slips in through the enormous, heavy doors.

There's not a surface that's unornamented: everything is gilded gold and ivory, rose tone and pastel blue, interlocking patterns on marble floors and wrought iron, porcelain. Angels and saints cling to the ceiling and gaze down upon the sinners below—few that there are, dotting the antique chairs, or on the unforgiving floors as they kneel and pray. Every inch of space is overflowing with the organ's

triumphant cries, the delicate embellishments of the classical hymns that remind Will so strongly of Hannibal in his living room, his fingers moving swiftly and surely over the harpsichord's keys.

Everything is light and bright. There's not a place that's free of it. It's the most tremendous sensory marvel Will has ever encountered, and he knows at once why Hannibal must love it so.

There's nothing like this at home. This is hundreds of years of art and architecture and culture consolidated into a single space. This is lushness and beauty beyond imagining, beyond capturing in words, or even sight. There's not a photograph or sketch that could encompass the feeling of standing here with the many arches flying overhead, with the pillars flanking the sides, and the ornately carved marble barricade with wooden shutter-style doors preventing access to the pulpit. Being here, with the faces of the apostles graven into the walls, the rendered face of Christ staring down upon you and being just… surrounded by them, by heaven's representatives, and high holiness. Overwhelmed, crushed by all of it.

What's more crushing, though, is that Will does not recognize a single face, a single figure among the crowd. Hannibal's not here.

But there's nowhere else for Will to go, despite the fact that the quiet *whirr* of his carry-on's wheels on the marble is practically sacrilegious, let alone the *click* of the Louboutins' heels. Will takes a steadying breath that doesn't steady him at all. Despite the curious looks he receives from those better served by prayer, he progresses down the aisle and tucks into a vacant seat. He rolls his bag in, too, and pushes it down to clear a space beside him. He considers laying his father's jacket upon the floor. In the end, he doesn't. He takes it from his shoulders and places it on the seat of the chair behind him as he kneels before it.

Will's hair falls around his face as he ducks his head, as his lashes flutter closed, and he waits.

How long has it been since he's prayed? Was it the final rite of safe passage he'd offered to his father's soul at the funeral? Was it before that, suffocating on humidity and Louisiana heat in a plain little building without so much as a ceiling fan?

Does it even matter how long ago it was? God has never seemed keen on Will's prayers. In that regard, the Ripper was a more loving and attentive deity than the Holy Spirit ever was.

And whether or not he's physically near, Will feels close to Hannibal here.

He doesn't want to think he's wrong—that he may have misread the placement of the twisted heart in the chapel of Johns Hopkins as less of a message, and more of a map. One meant to point him here. To a promise fulfilled.

If you love me then as you do right now…

I do, he wants to say, to scream, to swear before anyone, everyone. Tucked into his palm, Will rubs his thumb over the texture of the band, the smooth golden edges, the thin and delicate beveling on either side of the platinum chasm that encircles the center, diamond-cut and faceted to reflect the light. It's beautiful. Eye-catching, and contemporary enough to be interesting with its textures and two-toned colors, but the overall effect is somehow classic. He wonders if Hannibal would agree. He wants to find out. To offer this, and everything, and keep and be kept always and forever. *I do, I always have. I always will.*

But Hannibal isn't here, and so there is only the option to wait. All night, and all day hence, and all nights and days beyond that, too, if he must. Upon that beautiful and unforgiving floor, Will kneels.

Before God and his son and all his saints, he prays—but not for forgiveness. Not from Him, anyway.

And he waits.

The later it gets, the more strangers filter out. It's clear this is now regarded as a tourist's space as much as a holy space, but Will is not deterred by the lingering glances of those in button-down clothing fit to be a corporate uniform, nor by the men of the cloth who emerge every so often to attend the needs of this shrine. For a long time, he doesn't move at all. Once their tasks are done, there is nothing to do about the stranger in their midst. They won't turn him away; he's given them no reason to.

He wonders if they think him devout. In a sense, he is.

Eventually, the tourists leave. So, too, do the locals. Will is left with silence and penance, a holy rite before these grand machinations of something… bigger, perhaps. And older. But not greater.

It feels sacrilegious to even think it. But if the Ripper had his own house of worship, Will would surely be there instead. The only altar Will has ever known for his wayward god is the bed they both once shared. It lies empty now, bare of both of them, as they once bared themselves within it. It's disassembled, disarticulated, packed away like a secret.

But Will's love has never been secret, has it? From the very first evening, Hannibal saw his fascination, saw his mind, saw his blood painted in broad strokes across his back and his knuckles and his face, and thought it good. He saw a worshiper worth taking under his wing—a consort worth taking into his heart.

And if Will no longer has his heart after all this, then what does he have?

We have us, Wilhelmina whispers as the hour comes upon midnight and at long last, Will opens his eyes. Looks around, and sees nothing. No one. *And when we hunt him to the ends of the earth, we will have him again.*

She's right—Will knows her to be right, and her statements to be true, but it doesn't stop the hurt in his chest when he finds himself alone, or the aching in his knees and his back when he finally climbs to his feet. It doesn't stop him from feeling shaken and exhausted and wounded and disappointed, the culmination of the last few terrible days of emotional whiplash. It doesn't stop the emotions from making themselves liquid, lapping at the backs of his eyes and spilling forward slowly, covering his eyes in a thick and blurry sheen.

But Will doesn't need his sight, really. He feels attuned to this place, now; like he could surely navigate it blind—and so without blinking, without letting those tears fall, he steps into the aisle. Walks up and ascends the steps to the raised dais, and stands before the gate, stares at the altar on the other side, even now covered with cloth and the ornamental chalice of wine, the dish bearing the Host, the candles, the incense burner on its chain, fragrant with frankincense and myrrh. The air is bright and blurred, smoky around the edges, and Will knows that if he cries his makeup will smudge, but does it matter when there is no one left whose opinion he cares to hear?

The wraith has had her time to mourn that false death. But Will himself has not had time to grieve the loss he suffered at his own hands. He will someday have Hannibal back, of that much he's sure, but who is to say how much things will have changed by then? Whether their love will remain as real as it felt, as thrilling and challenging, and yet so easy; this beautifully complicated, uncomplicated thing, growing and living and thriving between them, and now…

Will's hand closes tightly around the ring.

But, God, he *had* hoped.

He takes an unsteady breath and lowers his head. He can hear his heartbeat in his ears as he slides it on his finger and feels it, far too loose; even Wilhelmina's promises and assurances muffled down to whispers in the wake of this ill fit. For a moment, there is nothing in his head but the ghost of the man he did this for. The absence fills the empty spaces in the cathedral as much as his presence would. Perhaps more, for Will has come full circle at long last: stood in these hallowed, austere halls and felt the vibrations of the stars through the chapel windows, and he has seen blood upon ancient marble floors. He has seen the art the monster is capable of, just as he's had the void inside his heart filled by an equal, a man made flesh. A god who walked the earth.

I want to find him, Will had begged her in that dream, the very one that he later saw come true. Lush opulence, decadence—all because of Hannibal. So consumed by dread and fear, he hadn't realized what he had been seeing. What Wilhelmina had been asking, when she posed him that question: what comes after death? *But I know he's going to find me first.*

Yes, she'd purred, and her expression had been fearsome and fond. She had known, long before he had consciously accepted the nature of their beloved. *Will you be ready?*

Oh.

Will turns with immediacy and feels the heavy sensation of no longer being alone in a room when he expected to be. Hannibal's absence had filled every cell in his body, occupied every thought in his mind so completely, that Will had not even felt the moment he arrived.

He blinks, and the world clears, and the tears fall.

Hannibal stands before him at the base of those short steps, a figure clad in black with his shirtsleeves rolled up around his forearms, his slacks straight-legged and fitted, his shoes shiny against the marble, handsome enough to rival the sinful grace Lucifer carried even after he Fell. He wears no coat, stares up at Will with dark eyes, starving, though his hands are loose at his sides—the sort of artificial laxness that comes when a predator is playing at being docile, while judging the threat posed by the newcomer in the room.

Will doesn't care. His heart and mind have screamed their way through this ordeal to such an extent that he doesn't know or care whether Hannibal will catch him or let him crash. He'll find out at the moment they collide, one way or another—

—and Hannibal catches Will around the waist with enough strength that the breath is crushed from his lungs, holds him inches off the ground so that his feet cannot touch and his heart cannot beat, threads a hand into Will's hair so thoroughly that he cannot think; embraces him until it hurts, and until he finally, *finally* feels whole. Through the pain comes the sweetest sensation, the most heady and exquisite rush of serotonin and dopamine until all his hurts abate and the worries fade.

Will's mouth cracks on a tearful smile as he rubs his face against Hannibal's temple and says, "You're *here."* For even knowing the danger, how can he be afraid when he's finally home? The release is like cutting the strings on a marionette, except Will is not some puppet to be played; rather, it's the unfurling of a sail prepared to catch the wind and propel them forward, faster, together, so long as the conditions are right.

This feels right. It always has.

And perhaps it's the words; perhaps it's the inflection of intoxicated joy and relief in Will's voice, but Hannibal lets out a breath, an aborted sigh. His hand in Will's hair doesn't gentle, but it twines into his curls and cups the base of his skull—no longer a grip that could be used to wrench him back, but one to draw him closer. He leans forward slowly, until Will's toes brush the bottom stair, places him carefully upon his feet, but does not yet let him go.

Will doesn't want to be let go, so that suits him just fine. He unwinds his arms from around Hannibal's shoulders, cradles his jaw; the monster pauses, assessing the threat to his own neck, even as the man gently turn his head so his lips can brush the base of Will's thumb. It's not a kiss, not yet. But it's so much closer than Will's had in days, and he loves it. Loves *him.*

But then Hannibal pauses; draws his mouth away from Will's hand, and unwinds the arm around his waist. Catches Will's wrist tightly in his palm, though not harshly. Draws it away from his face. Holds it between them, his eyes intent and fixated on the band loosely clinging to Will's finger.

And he stares when Will draws back, takes a step back. Around, down. Until its Hannibal framed by the gates, by the altar, and Will is the one standing below on the marble floors—and with a wince he does his best to hide, Will slips one foot backward and balances carefully on the blood-red toe of his Louboutins, and sinks to one knee.

As he wanted to in the kitchen of their home. As he wanted to in the restaurant, with Hannibal fine and proud and comfortable and seated across from him. As he's wanted to so many times, and forced himself to wait until the truth was laid out between them, and, well… it's certainly out.

And they're both here, aren't they?

Hannibal's gaze is even, calm, but undeniably intent. His face is unchanging, but he tilts his head, and for a moment, his lips purse, and there are lines across his forehead, around his eyes, and—

With his heart in his throat, Will takes the ring from his finger, and holds it up in offering. His eyes sting, and he sniffles, and it's pathetic, but Wilhelmina is calling for her mate as desperately as Will is. They would hunt him to the ends of the Earth, take him back, make him listen, but the decision they're faced with now is not theirs to make. It's only his. Can only ever be his.

And for a time, in midnight in this holy place, this liminal space, this event horizon, they wait to see whether their respective halves of this bridge might draw down and descend, and meet in the middle once more.

Hannibal inhales, silent, but his chest rises with it, expands, and his chin lifts. He's as prideful as he is analytical, and he would have every right in the world to be angry, to point out each and every thing Will did wrong that brought them to this.

But.

Hannibal's eyes linger on the ring, and follow the natural line of Will's arm back to his face. With a quiet exhale, a fond huff, he reaches out and brushes a wayward curl from Will's face, a touch so patient and gentle that Will immediately clenches his jaw to stop himself from sobbing. As it is, he can feel his eyes desperate to water again, consecrate the marble floors with his apologies and all the different choices he would have made in a different time, in a different world.

"Will," he murmurs, and smooths his thumb over the curve of his cheek, and Jesus, he doesn't want to cry again, but—"I believe we both still have confessions to make, do we not?"

Will swallows past his heart in his throat, and tries and fails to be subtle as he lowers his head and discreetly swipes at his nose with the back of his hand. Goddamn it, he must look like a kid. “Yeah.”

But Hannibal doesn’t seem bothered. He extends his hand, and doesn’t seem to blink or breathe until Will takes it. And when he does, it’s like watching the sun break through the clouds over the sea. A subtle relaxation, at first, and then the rest comes all at once. He tugs so gently, and when Will’s grip tightens, his grip strengthens; pulls Will up like he’s nothing, comes to steady him with a hand at his waist and the other at his cheek, pushing into his hair and cradling his skull. As soon as it ended, though, the distance comes between them again. Cautious. Respectful. “I think the confessional will serve us just fine, if you find it morally acceptable.”

Will wants to say that there’s clearly a lot he finds morally acceptable, and that if *that’s* their compass, both of them are probably pretty fucked. He doesn’t say it, but the joke is as clear in Hannibal’s eyes as if he’d said it aloud.

He follows. They’re the only two left here for the night—could be the only two left in the world, for all Will cares. And so opening the door on the side of the confessional that his father used to call *the sinner’s spotlight* is a particularly keen sting.

Still, he gets in, though the irony of confessing his sins to a serial killer is certainly not lost on him. Confessing them to the man he loves, though. That’s a harder thing to stomach.

“Forgive me… Father, for I have sinned,” Will murmurs, and stumbles over his words in the cramped quarters, knowing who is on the other side, even if he can’t see Hannibal’s face. “It’s been…” How long has it been? When did he stop apologizing for who he was? Well… when did they move to Wolf Trap? “…four years since my last confession.”

“In the grand scheme of the universe, some would consider four years to be less than a blink,” Hannibal replies, measured and reasonable. “There are none among us without sin.”

“Some less than others.” Will pulls his knees in. He wonders if the cabinet has more room than the confessor’s side of the booth. Hannibal doesn’t sound discomfited in the least. “Where do you want me to start?”

“Where do you want to start?”

The question sounds genuine enough. Openly and honestly curious. But there’s so much that Will doesn’t know how, or where, or *when,* and—“Ask me what you want to know,” he rasps. “If there’s anything else I think of, I’ll fill it in.”

“Very well.” Hannibal takes a breath and releases it. It’s a soft thing, but in this space, Will can hear it. He wonders if Hannibal can hear the pounding of his heart. “How long has it been since you slept?”

It takes Will off guard. Even more so since he doesn’t know the answer. “How long has it been since you left?”

Hannibal sounds disapproving, but sympathetically unsurprised. “Late afternoon on the twenty-fourth. It’s now early morning of the twenty-sixth. And accounting for your eventful evening and the time difference—”

“Two days,” Will says.

“More than, I would imagine.” Is it possible to sound both entirely unfazed and totally displeased at the same time? “Did you try to sleep on the plane?”

“I was too busy wondering if I’d find you here or if I’d have to hunt you halfway around the world.”

“Well, I suppose that answers one of my questions.”

Will blinks. “Does it?”

“Two, perhaps.” A prickle of annoyance, but Hannibal sounds more gently amused than anything. It makes it hard to be mad at him. “Whether you expected me to be waiting, and what you would do if I wasn’t.”

Will thinks of the hours spent in silence, in prayer. “Doesn’t seem like you were waiting.”

“Correct; I wasn’t expecting you until tomorrow at the earliest, but I found a sympathetic tour guide who promised to inform me if anyone of your description were to arrive for any length of time. Unfortunately, I was temporarily inconvenienced by European cell service, and apparently you’re far too beautiful to be someone I was expected to know, until the fourth hour rolled around and you’d had no one to join you.”

Will chokes on his breath. His cheeks and chest flare with heat, and he’d probably expect it to be a line if Hannibal didn’t sound quite so irritated about it. “Well, I mean, I was praying. They probably didn’t see my face.”

“An apt thing, then, that I gave a general description of your person and what you may be wearing. The disbelief held true.”

Pleasure and faint embarrassment roll into one, compounded by disbelief. Hannibal is one of the most fiercely charismatic and attractive people he’s ever known. Will could only conceptualize the situation he describes in reverse. “Then they’re stupid.”

“Undoubtedly, but not wrong. Perhaps I wasn’t generous enough in my description of you. I should’ve shown her a picture.”

Bullshit. But Will sits up a little straighter. “You have my picture?”

“I procured it from a mutual friend who was skilled with a camera.” His voice edges toward dark, but lightweight and amused. Will’s mind whirs. Does he mean—? Hannibal continues. “Regardless, it’s the reason I wasn’t as prompt as I would have preferred to have been. I’m sorry that I kept you waiting.”

Will presses his knees together and squeezes his hands between them. His bones ache. They probably kind of deserve it. “I kept you waiting a lot longer.”

“On the contrary, I would have expected another few days to get everything arranged.”

“Priority witness protection,” Will murmurs. “And Deioss was willing to make an exception to his schedule for the right price.”

“Ah, James. How much did he ask for?” Hannibal sounds intrigued.

“Five million.”

A noise of interest. “I would have expected more than that.”

“Yeah. I gave him ten to make sure he knew I wasn’t fucking around.”

A sound—is Hannibal laughing? “He must’ve been beside himself. How did you arrange the payment?”

“To come through the Vergers as a sign-on bonus. Molson doesn’t like having influential people in the world he doesn’t have a hand on.”

“Prudent.”

“I, um.” His fingers creak as Will pulls his hands free, pop as he curls them into fists upon his lap. “I also arranged for our stuff to be sent after us, when—I mean, if—we…” Even implying they may not last together is enough to have Wilhelmina’s talons curling into his lungs, clenching around his heart.

But Hannibal’s voice, when it comes, does not sound like he’s in any way offended by the presumption. “Did you?”

“Yes.”

“And I assume you took into account how legal custody of your belongings may change providence following your disappearance.”

Will swallows. His voice strengthens. “The FBI saw where I put my things. By the time they go back for them, they won’t be there.” A beat. He is mulling over whether or not he should admit it when the words fall from his mouth regardless. It seems his heart has made the decision for him; he’ll take Hannibal’s reaction as it comes. “Margot knows, by the way.”

Hannibal hums. “I would be surprised if she hadn’t figured it out. She’s an especially shrewd young woman.” His own moment of silence. “I find it interesting how closely you guarded your own knowledge of my practices, considering how quick you are to inform me of others knowing. Even those close to you.”

“I know my own intentions.” Will sits back in the seat, but there’s nowhere for him to go. His knees are crammed against the separating wall, the arches of his feet ache from hours of wearing the Louboutins, especially upon the cobblestone. His legs and back throb dully from kneeling on the floor. It’s a hard thing on the body to be a worshiper of any sort. But it’s done with the heart, isn’t it? And Will has known for a long time where his own lies. “And whose interests I protect.”

“Under normal circumstances, most would assume you meant yourself, and others following you. It’s a biological imperative to prioritize one’s own well being.” A pause. Hannibal leaves room for Will to interject, to protest, but Will can hear the segue in his voice and in his words. He knows Hannibal knows. He has no need to defend himself. Not yet. “However, given the way events played out, where I found you when the time came, and what I witnessed when you were in their custody, I’ve realized there’s been quite some time where you’ve placed my life and my interests over your own. Yet you didn’t confide in me regarding what you knew. You trusted me with your body and your heart, but not your mind. I consider myself a man who is able to extrapolate many lines of probability to an end, and yet the one I faced was not one that ever occurred to me.”

There’s no direct question posed, but Will knows what he’s asking. *Why? Why? Why?* It’s the same thing he’s been screaming in his head since he first found out. Since he wondered why Hannibal

didn't tell him. When this entire crazy plot began to form, and then unravel. He had so many chances. They both did.

"I guess…" Will says slowly. "It was a few things." A shift of motion behind a screen. God, what Will would do to see Hannibal's face; he reaches out and his fingers brush the base of it, rough wicker and wire and… he doesn't even know what it's made of. He just knows it's unbearable.

"Tell me."

"When I first found out, I was scared," he admits. "I'd been scared before that, because you were… good and honest, I thought. Kind, but cruel in the way powerful men are. You wanted all of me that I had to give, and I started thinking maybe that wouldn't be so bad. Looking back, I know what you were doing. Systematic addiction. You wanted me reliant. Fostering codependency. You didn't want me to have anything in my life that wasn't you." He takes a breath. Nearly chokes on it. Maybe he's drowning. Maybe he's dead. "I'd seen little signs. I knew before I could accept it. I think I knew after you left the Hanged Man, but I didn't *realize* until you left me the Ten of Pentacles. The man in the garden who looked like me. I nearly lost it in front of Jack."

"You started working with him before you had known."

He sounds relieved. Perhaps it was a question now checked off his list.

"I started working with Jack because I—" Will's nails hook on the ridges of the screen. He tugs gently, respectful of its age, while fiercely resentful of the barrier it creates. "He tracked me down after the Press Club murder, because of…" The phone the Ripper left in place of the victim's heart. Will knows Hannibal knows it well. "He knew about my site and he wanted my help. I didn't want to help him. I had less than no interest in helping him, but I wanted to save your life. I was still so fucking mad that the Ripper never noticed me until after I'd met you. I was blind." Will swallows hard. It sounds loud in the small space, confined as they are. His voice softens, and his head ducks, and his hair falls around his face. He murmurs, "That's the night I realized I loved you. And the night I realized I loved him, too. But the… the wrong thing being the right thing to do was too ugly a thought, if it meant I lost you. So I told Jack I'd help, as long as he couldn't prosecute me for anything I did to catch the Ripper. And I hated myself so much."

"What you did was with good intentions," Hannibal murmurs. "I'm sure Jack put you in a position where you couldn't refuse him."

"Not easily," Will says softly—and his voice darkens. "But I would have gotten in a lot less trouble in the long run if I'd told him to fuck off. It wasn't until later that I found out from Gideon that Jack talked to *you.* You pointed him at Freddie, and Freddie pointed him at me. You're lucky I was able to convince Jack that you had nothing to do with what I knew."

The sound Hannibal makes is a hum of consideration, albeit one that pings Will's senses as something more analytical. More ruthless. He sits up a little straighter. "Aligning myself with Jack Crawford put me in his good graces. I was able to maneuver him later because of what I had done then. Getting you caught in the crossfire was not my intention." A quiet click, like that of a fingernail tapping the divider between them. "When did you start meeting with Gideon?"

"After he casted my arm. He needed a metaphorical shoulder. I needed information; he didn't have much. I was going to cut him loose, and then this whole thing with you started." Will, too, leans forward. "He was more useful to me as a scapegoat than a source. In the beginning and in the end."

"How did you convince him to kill his wife?"

“He was already going to kill his wife,” Will mutters. “I just told him how, and made him think he’d get away with it.”

A sound of intrigue; dark, deep interest. “So you were working with Jack to catch the Ripper. Meeting with Gideon to get information. Your investigation was moving forward. What was the catalyst for the change?”

Will says nothing.

It takes a moment, and then it clicks. “You found out.”

“I didn’t know what to do,” Will replies softly by way of admission. “The thought that you could love me and still be the Chesapeake Ripper were mutually exclusive. You had been so interested in the way my mind worked, I just… figured you wanted to wind me up and watch me go. And if that were the case, you’d tell me whatever you thought I wanted to hear. Hence the addiction, the codependency —but if you weren’t invested in me beyond, you know, a science project, then if I told you what I knew, I faced the very real possibility you might kill me.”

Silence. Then, finally, a gentle exhalation. Even separated as they are, the air is tense. Thick. The old hurts come to the surface, and Will would recoil if there were anywhere else to go, even knowing what he does now. It’s certainly in the top three worst nights of his life. “That must have been devastating for you.”

“It was,” Will whispers.

“I always thought that when you found out, you would confront me. Why did you not?”

Even knowing Hannibal can’t see him, Will averts his eyes. “Margot.”

Another beat. Another breath, this one more incredulous, more understanding. “Mason attacked her that night. You brought her to me. Why?”

“Knowing you were the Ripper actually made me more certain in your competency as a doctor.” Maybe it’s a rude admission, but Will doesn’t care. “I knew you’d do it if I asked, because as long as you didn’t know what I knew, you’d continue to keep making me rely on you. For you, it was a victory. For me, I had a good excuse to be halfway out of my head.”

“I will admit, you telling me that you wanted to kill him was a greater victory, in my mind. It was a crisis I felt uniquely qualified to handle.”

Will rubs his hands over his face. Closes his eyes, and presses the heels of his hands to them. “Actually, that was what made me decide.”

Motion—Hannibal shifts, sits forward. “How so?”

Will remembers it so clearly. The fury. The warmth of Hannibal’s hands. His lips against the corner of Will’s snarling mouth, soothing. “If you only wanted to see me kill someone, you had your chance. But you told me to wait, because you didn’t want to lose me. And I realized that you wouldn’t have said that if you didn’t care about what happened to me. I needed to take more time to figure out what was happening before I acted.” Will inhales. “All of this started because I decided I was going to kill Mason. I didn’t know what I was going to do about you yet.”

“And then you wrote your first letter to the Ripper.”

Will pulls his hands from his eyes; the dimness is not so different from the complete darkness. He remembers coming up with the idea of the hidden letters. Wondering if Hannibal would find what he left. Trusting that he would. And then pouring out his soul. “I knew I couldn’t give you to Jack. I loved you too much to give you up, no matter how pissed off I was. Then it was Thanksgiving.” A strange little smile twists at Will’s mouth; his lashes lower, and he touches the bite on his neck, the ridges of each individual puncture that makes up a larger scar. “And I remembered what it was like in the beginning, before I started worrying about the Ripper. I didn’t have to worry anymore. Knowing you were the Ripper told me so much more about you than the days we spent together. I knew what you wanted, and I knew how to give it to you to get what I wanted.”

“And what was it you wanted?”

He curls his fingers. Lets his nails dig in, just a little bit. An sweet sting. “I wanted you to want me so much you would never get rid of me. The more you needed me, the more powerful I felt. And the more powerful I felt, the more I wanted to protect you. What started out simple got more and more complicated. And I guess that I…” The words get caught in Will’s throat. They’re unpleasant. Unflattering. “I didn’t want to give up the power I had. And by the time I realized I was hurting you, I was scared that if I told you, you would lose your trust in me. And at the same time… I thought you didn’t trust me, because you wouldn’t tell me.”

A moment of silence. This sting is decidedly less sweet.

And then Hannibal speaks. “Will. Listen to me: your empowerment has been a beautiful thing to behold. It was my belief that if you were to come to the realization of who I was on your own, it would give you autonomy over the situation and how it was handled. I could answer your protests as they came. When you failed to acknowledge what I thought I was putting plainly, I will admit, I had… concerns.”

Will sits up straight at once. “Are you—did you think I was stupid?”

Hannibal huffs. “There were times when I suspected you knew more than you were letting on. But without the confrontation I was expecting, I had no context in which to frame what you may or may not have known. It was inconceivable to me that you would know who and what I was, and yet carry on as though you didn’t.” Hannibal makes a faint, unhappy sound. “And you did it with such success that there were times when I questioned your loyalties. The notes you wrote to the Ripper that I wasn’t meant to know about: I wondered often which side of myself you would choose when the time came, and how I would react to your rejection of either. Call this an unconventional arrangement, Will, but the fact that you knew of my identity and were deliberately misleading me is actually an enormous relief.”

At first it feels like he can’t breathe. Oh, God, talk about an enormous relief—it builds in Will’s stomach and pushes so hard at the bottom of his lungs that he can’t contain it, bursts out with elated laughter that he can’t hold in and doesn’t care to.

And Hannibal’s voice, too, changes; lowers with warm fondness the likes of which Will almost feared he’d never hear again. “It’s a rare thing for me to be outmaneuvered, Will. I have never been so delighted about the extent to which I underestimated someone. Perhaps I should be upset at the dishonesty, but in truth, I was far more concerned about *why* you lied than the fact that you did. Now I see your perspective, and I see my own failing in that I expected you to act as I knew you when we first met, and not who you proved to be when I fell in love with you.”

Will’s nails dig in, scratch, scrape. The fact that this confessional is probably hundreds of years old holds no concern for him. *“Hannibal,”* he says, sighs it, laughs it, stares at the screen and wonders if

he's as desperate as Will is—"Do you have any more questions, because otherwise I would really like to kiss you right now."

"Just a few more, darling, I promise," he murmurs, but he shifts and Will knows he's just as restless. "I imagine something in your plan went awry. What happened?"

"Gideon couldn't do what the fuck he was told," Will growls; his agitation is redoubled by the fact that he's so close to Hannibal and can't touch him. Wilhelmina, too, is desperate to pace and pant and howl, but there's no room for it in here. "Annalise's family showed up and he went nuts. We had a two week window. He was supposed to give me a day's notice so I could prep Margot. He'd kill Annalise and keep it clean, I'd scrub his house of forensics, and display her as a Ripper kill. He thought we'd blame it on Mason." Will sniffs derisively. "But Mason wasn't ever meant to be a scapegoat. Margot and I would kill him. If we'd had more *time,* I would have explicitly implicated Gideon, and then I would have come home. When Jack called on me the next morning, I would point the FBI in his direction, where I told him to lay low following Annalise's death so he wouldn't be suspected of her murder while the chaos unfolded. Gideon wouldn't have expected me to double cross him; he would have fought. Jack would have killed him rather than lose him. Win-win."

Hannibal's voice is even, but there's an undercurrent of pride. "That's a great many variables to balance."

"They were *balanced,"* Will grits out. "But Gideon killed the family. The kid. And he trashed the house. I sent him to get rid of their bodies and he was stupid enough to get spotted, so he tipped off the FBI before the house could burn the way I wanted it to. He cut Annalise up, it was *not* clean. I had to change things on the fly. *And,"* Will snaps, "he texted me at midnight to tell me she was dead and he needed my help. I had *no* warning." Will takes a deep, unsteady breath. "I never meant to leave you like that. And when I asked you to run away, I wasn't lying. If the time had come, I would have gone with you. But… I also knew that if something got messed up, it could be a way out. But everything was so much worse than I imagined." Exhales, just as unsteady. "And the body you left…"

"An unfortunate necessity—and rushed. Not to my usual standard, but the image was effective enough to get the point across. It had more to do with the location."

Will nods, despite knowing Hannibal can't see him. "The records."

"A subroutine held on a USB drive that would allow me to edit my information without displaying any edits made. Minor adjustments to body mass and blood type. Simple, but effective."

"I figured it was something." Will closes his eyes; he's still on edge, twitchy. Just the thought of seeing it again, beautiful and terrible… "I'm, uh. Glad I got the message."

Hannibal hears the bite in his voice and addresses it immediately. Will silently curses himself that he didn't hide it better. "What is it?"

But he can't, he *can't,* not again, he—"Ask me after I've woken up with you there." He swallows hard. "I can't really be sure until I've slept."

"Sure of what?"

Will's teeth snap. He needs to get out of this box. It's starting to feel more and more like a coffin. "That this is real."

“It’s very real, Will. I’m here and so are you. It’s one in the morning; we’re in the Norman Chapel in Palermo, Italy. Here at the end of all things.”

“Then let me see you.” Will sits forward, knees against the divider. Hands against the screen. He needs this, he needs—“Please. I’ve said everything I need to say, Hannibal. Most of what you could tell me, I already know. And I love you.”

Will takes a breath, and it catches in his throat, burns in his eyes, throbs in his heart.

“I understand you. I know that the world is full of people who are so far removed from being *people* that they barely think about anything that’s happening around them, have no awareness of what they say or what they do. They take up all this space and don’t do anything with it. But there’s so much more to being alive. If you just live each day in fear of death so you never follow your instincts, then what’s the point? Being animals is a part of being human.”

Will laughs. It hurts.

“Society is a fucking joke. And it’s learned to isolate those who are different and leave them to die. But the best of us can play the game, because we know it isn’t real. And the only thing that *is* real is that human beings, in their prime, sit at the top of the food chain. We evolved to be predators. We’re the best of them. In the way that wolves and sharks and lions kill and eat and continue their cycle in the purest, simplest way. But we—human beings—we don’t just live. We *create.* Music and theatre. Expressions of life in sound and light and color. Big gestures that make meaning of temporary moments that get immortalized as memories, and by reputation.”

He breathes through it. In the quiet, he can hear Hannibal breathe, too. And it feels like sacrilege to interrupt this, but Will has to say it, and Hannibal has to know. “And that’s you. You hunt and you kill, because you evolved to hunt and kill. It’s not what you do, it’s who you are. You make monuments, and you create sculptures, and you provide feasts, and you start discussions. You immortalize yourself in a way that can’t be touched by people who are just looking for a man to blame for the things they can’t explain. You’re not God, but you might as well be, for all they can do to stop you. But God doesn’t make people answer for the things they do. You do.”

Maybe a confessional was the best place for this, after all. It *does* almost feel like talking to God.

But this god is listening. And with him, Will knows he’s loved.

“What I do—the way my brain works,” Will says, and changes direction. “I become other people. I know why they do what they do. I feel the way they feel, if I get too much into it. And so much of it is so disconnected from what it means to be human. Phones. Jobs. Money. That’s not what people are supposed to be. But following your instincts… finding family, and protecting them… you become more than what you are. You become more than yourself. So, killers—they’re attuned to those instincts more than most people, and the Ripper has always been the best of them. It’s why I started writing about him. About you.” Will licks his lips; his mouth is dry. “But I realized that if I kept writing about the things you do, I’d never get to do them. The part of me that was writing about you… was the person I told myself I could never be. But I don’t want to live vicariously anymore. I don’t want to imagine what it feels like without feeling it myself. I want… I want to feel the way that I feel when I’m with you. Always. Even when it’s bad. Because it’s *more.* It’s like… being alive at all the best places in time, all at once. And I get to do it with someone who understands why being just *one thing* isn’t… *me.* Because in your own way, it isn’t you either. And I really… *really* like that I never have to explain it. Because you *know,* and I love you for that. For all of it.”

For a moment, he can't even breathe. "And, um… I'm gonna stop. Now. Because you're really quiet and I'm really tired and kinda delirious and—"

The sound of the cabinet opening is jarring. Hannibal removing himself from this confined space they placed themselves in is terrifying. When the seal is breached, it's like the air leaves the room, and Will's heart stops.

And then the door opens.

He's blinded by light, by gold and saints on the ceiling and Hannibal bending down and leaning in and cupping Will's jaw in both hands and kissing him like they're about to die, like the Holy Ghost might descend and strike Will down for his blasphemy at any second, and like this is goodbye. Hannibal licks into his mouth and he is warm and sweet like wine, strong and demanding and familiar, and oh, fuck—

"Get out of this box," Hannibal growls against his mouth, and it's the most disrespectful Will has ever heard him be about something of historical significance—"and stand with me before the altar and ask me again."

He pulls away and Will is dazed, and he blinks up at the shadow Hannibal creates in his vision and can almost see a crown of horns. "What?"

"Will," he says, and in the dim light, his eyes are bright and sharp and hellfire red. "Get out of there, *now. And ask me again."*

It takes a moment. And when the words sink in, he can barely stop his vision swimming. Will whispers, "Okay," and takes Hannibal's hand.

They walk each other down the aisle. Meet in the middle, before the wooden gate that sections off the dais where the altar begins. Hannibal stands as he had before Will bled his soul out in the form of words on the marble floors. But as Will kicks off his high heels and drops to both knees, he feels more whole than he ever has.

For the second time, he holds up the ring, and meets Hannibal's eyes. Like Hannibal, he doesn't ask. Like Hannibal, he just says, "Marry me."

A breath. A step. Hannibal reaches, and his palm settles just below Will's chin, rests loosely around his throat. The other trails his fingers down Will's temple, over the curve of his cheek. Down to his carotid, pulsing placidly against the pads of his fingers. He could break Will's neck, if he wanted to. Instead, he presses his index and middle fingers up, *in.* Feeling the thrum of Will's heart as he asks, "Do you take me to be yours, knowing what I am? How terrible I can be, and how terribly I love you?"

Why would I have come here if I didn't? he wants to scream, but he doesn't. Hannibal isn't looking for a rhetorical question, but a definitive answer. Absolute proof, that he can feel for himself. See and believe it, once and for all.

Will wants the same.

He reaches up with the hand that holds the ring, and Hannibal's fingers twitch—but he is patient and his gaze is soft when Will places the pad of his thumb against the underside of his outstretched wrist.

“I do,” Will whispers, because this moment is… something. Everything. It’s whole, bursting, overflowing with anxiety and desire, with affection and worry, and the sting of wounds as they scab over and peel away, old and new. Over the join of their hands, he meets Hannibal’s eyes, and waits just long enough to know that Hannibal has felt no uptick in his pulse. No lie.

And Will presses more firmly in return; feels the give of fragile flesh beneath his finger, and the very edge of his nail digs in. It’s Wilhelmina’s influence, but she, like he, is determined not to be lied to—even though they have lived enough days together, spent enough nights together, that she knows the answer she seeks.

Will asks, “Do you?”

Their gazes hold. Something passes over Hannibal’s face, comes out in the slow blink of his lashes, the way his hands gentle, as the frenetic energy that surrounds him loses its edge. His shoulders do not relax, but the tension still somehow drains away; in this moment, with his hand at Will’s throat, and Will’s life in his hands, Will feels no more threat with him here than he had in their bed. He holds Will jealously, but with reverence—and though Will can all but see the many words that are milling around behind his eyes, Hannibal knows just as well that Will wants exactly what he wanted. A simple answer. Complete, full-stop confrontation of where they stand. Yes or no.

Hannibal says, “I do.”

His heartbeat is steady. His touch withdraws. He holds out his hands, and when he hauls Will up, whatever plastic suit he had zipped around the messier parts of his inner self is gone. What’s underneath is raw.

And when he’s on his bare feet against the marble again, when Hannibal pulls him close again, pushes Will’s hair away and presses his face to Will’s neck again, and with a quiet, wretched sound, edges his teeth along the imprints of that scar again—then, only *then,* can Will finally breathe.

“Put your ring on me, darling,” Hannibal growls against his ear, and a shudder traverses Will’s spine with such violence that his nails dig into Hannibal’s shoulders. “I think it’s time we stop pretending we’ll ever be free of one another.”

Will reaches for his hand, and Hannibal willingly lets loose his grip; he slides his hand down the side of Will’s neck, over his chest, a slow caress. His lashes lower as he looks at Will, so near, so warm.

Will removes the oversized ring from himself and places it on Hannibal, slips it over the swell of his knuckle. On him, it’s not large. Will looks up. “I don’t want to be free.”

“Nor I,” Hannibal replies. His gaze burns as he looks at the ring, touches it, rubs his fingers over it. It settles perfectly at the base of the digit, a gilded collar to match the circle of reddened scar tissue hidden below his shirt. “Classic and contemporary. It’s elegant, but eye-catching.”

Will exhales. Relief calms the tremble in his fingers, the tremor in his voice. “You like it?”

“Very much.”

“Good.” It comes out with more force than Will intended it, and Hannibal arches a brow. He huffs through his nose, and adds, “I want people to see it. I want them to know you’re mine.”

“I pity anyone who dares believe otherwise.” He skims his hands along the outsides of Will’s arms toward his shoulders, up his neck, and cradles his face in the broad warmth of his palms. And God,

Will doesn't want to be weak, but after everything he's endured these past few days, he is. He slumps forward, allows Hannibal to hold him up, and something in his chest clenches fiercely at the quiet, sympathetic *tsk* Hannibal makes. It would be condescending from anyone else. From him, though, who knows what these days have held—"You look tired, Will."

"I'm so tired," he admits in a whisper. Will leans forward, melts into the circle of Hannibal's arms, and rests his cheek on Hannibal's shoulder. God, his eyes hurt. Better to close them. That's nice. "Hey."

Hannibal rubs down his spine. It feels like heaven. "Hello, my love."

Will turns his face into Hannibal's neck and nuzzles at his warmth. He knows it's counter-intuitive for what he's about to ask, but, "You haven't kissed me yet."

"Hm?"

Will sighs. Lifts his face, and noses at Hannibal's jaw instead. Now that he *can,* he can't get enough. "You haven't kissed me yet. Again. I don't think we're married until you kiss me."

Hannibal's hands on him go still, if only for a moment. "Married."

"We made the vows," Will replies softly. "I gave you a ring in front of God and," he gestures vaguely, tiredly, and lifts his head toward the ceiling and the ancient eyes of angels and saints. "All of them."

Hannibal draws back. His expression is conflicted, but his eyes are fierce and sharp with joy. Hope. "If we exchanged vows, I believe we missed a few lines."

"We've already done the *in sickness and in health* bit." Will smiles when he sees the stunned expression that lurks within Hannibal's eyes. And deeper than that, fond exasperation and terrible want. His hands curl in Hannibal's shirt. "I didn't have anything white to wear, but I figured we're well past that."

Hannibal watches his face for a long handful of moments that linger and pass, one by one. "I would have made more comprehensive plans, but as always, it seems you're determined to surprise me."

There's a certain level of enjoyment to be had in catching Hannibal off guard, he'll admit. But in all honesty… "I love you," Will murmurs. "So much, Hannibal. I'm never gonna love you more, or be more happy to see you than I am right now. We're here. We should make the most of it."

A breath. Then a sigh. Hannibal's lip twitches back over his teeth and then exposes them entirely in a victorious, snarling smile. He smooths his thumbs over the crests of Will's cheekbones, and radiates a happiness so thorough that he glows with it in shades of onyx black and gleaming gold. "If that's what you want, far me it for me to deny you anything." But when he leans down, when Will tips his head up, Hannibal stops just short. In this tense, tight place between them, he smiles.

"What?"

"In his last moments, Abel Gideon referred to you as the *Bride of the Ripper.* Though I know he'll never know it, I find enormous satisfaction in proving him correct."

Will chokes down a laugh; it splits his mouth on a smile so wide it nearly hurts, burns through his eyes in saltwater tears. It's not entirely kind, but it's real. True. "Freddie called us *murder husbands* back when I barely knew you."

“Mm,” Hannibal purrs. He tilts his head, leans in—not close enough to kiss, but close enough to torture. Will wants to bite him for the insolence alone. “I like both.”

Will nudges his chin up insistently, and threads his fingers together around the nape of Hannibal’s neck. “I *am* both. Now shut up and marry me.”

He does—Hannibal kisses him at once, and Will snags his lower lip between his teeth. He purrs deep in his chest, worries it gently, laps at the soft inside until he’s met with the unyielding resistance of Hannibal’s jagged fangs. A hand slips into his hair and slides through, and even when he catches on tangles, it’s so familiar and good that it feels like coming home.

Will’s palms slice over his shoulders, his sternum, touches his chest and feels the breadth of it beneath his palms, the warmth, the thrum of Hannibal’s heart. When they part for breath, they’re still pressed together, and Will thinks that if the ancient roof were to crumble, if God and all his saints collapsed on them at this very moment, he’d die happy.

Let them come, snarls the voice in his mind, and Will cannot be sure whether it’s Wilhelmina’s or his own. Maybe neither. Maybe both.

And like Hannibal can hear him, he murmurs against Will’s mouth, “You are mine and I am yours, ‘til death do we part.”

Will’s hands curl into fists in Hannibal’s shirt. He looks up at him—this man, this monster, his *husband*—and flashes his teeth when he replies, “God should hope to be so lucky.”

From the moment Hannibal stepped foot in Italy, he knew (hoped) it would only be a matter of time until Will followed. There were a number of scenarios that played out in his mind concurrently of how their reunion would progress—some less pleasant than others. Those were the ones that haunted him in the darker hours, that even the lamp-lit architecture of Palermo’s majesty could not wipe from his mind. There were some that were, perhaps, idealistic to a fault. Those he held onto.

Still, as he wandered the shops and alleys and made his preparations, it was with the lingering determination that this would only go poorly if he allowed it to. But there were many things to attend to before his arrival; if Will were to come after him (and he *would,* he *had* to), there was only one place he would go. Given that Hannibal, himself, had other places he needed to be, there were other arrangements and agreements to be made. He kept an eye out—or rather, had one kept.

He had hopes, of course. And he was certain of what he wanted, in regards to how he’d prefer the chips finally fall. The moment his phone rang, that the woman mentioned a tourist in the chapel that had been there for hours, how could he do anything but run to him? How could he anticipate the terrible relief, the aching joy that washed over him upon seeing Will again? His mind demanded answers, but his body craved only its mate.

When he had approached, knowing Will couldn’t see him, he had considered what might have been if Will hadn’t come. If he’d accepted the protection of the FBI, or even left them and denied Hannibal still—even as he dared to think it, the monster inside him tore at his flesh with its claws made of steel and left ribbons of his insides, pools of blood on the floors of his mind that rivaled the photographs of Abel Gideon’s home.

No. Will would never have done that. They've fought for one another. Killed for one another. He believes that, truly.

But when Will turns around and the tears drip from his eyes and he whispers *you're here,* it soothes something more than Hannibal could have expected. To hear Will's voice as he speaks of the lengths to which he'd gone to protect Hannibal's life, both as man and monster—to hear through a confessional screen the words of a prophet, one ripping secrets off the walls of Hannibal's mind and building them a home with them, one worshiping and confessing and begging forgiveness that Hannibal has already given—

He expected many things of this reunion, but Will always seems to have a way of surprising him.

He arrives to the *Cappella Palatina* only halfway human, with clamoring thoughts that he dare not give voice to. Will pulls them out and lays them to rest, one by one.

He leaves it a husband.

And when they are together again, it feels as though both nothing and everything has changed.

Will's eyes are wide as he takes in the flat, its dark hardwood and plush antique rugs, the naturally high ceilings and the arched doorways, the windows that open up above the city as snowflakes drift through the air and melt before they hit the ground. The cold isn't meant to last long. Perhaps Will simply brought the warmth with him. It's a thought more borne of sentiment than fact, Hannibal knows, but as he watches Will spin in the middle of the sitting room, eyes wide as a child's and shadowed with a voyager's exhaustion, he feels warmer than he has in days.

"I'm surprised there's no antlers," Will says, though the tone of his voice speaks of fondness and humor. It's a fondness that Hannibal shares.

"They're in the bedroom," Hannibal replies drolly. At Will's raised brow, he huffs a laugh. "I'm lying. It's not my space. Only rented."

"Rented." Will looks to Hannibal, head tilted. "How long did you rent it for?"

Hannibal inclines his chin. "A week."

He lets out a breath and seems to consider that—then catches sight of something small and familiar and pauses. Will touches the head of the ceramic dog with his index finger. "This is mine."

Hannibal bites back a smile. "Yes."

"You brought some old, cheap figurine with you all the way to Italy?" He blinks, baffled, and looks at Hannibal with wide, bright eyes. "Why?"

Perhaps honesty in this case is more telling than he'd like it to be, but what more is there to tell, now? They're bound by more than faded enamel and glass. "Because it was yours."

Will huffs quietly, but his face softens, and his expression warms. He's stunning in profile, even exhausted—and now he belongs to Hannibal, fully and entirely.

It's nearly too much to believe, even if it's true.

Will sits in one of the chairs, which Hannibal knows from experience is more ornamental than comfortable. The first thing he does is remove his Louboutins again—also more ornamental than comfortable. The lines around his eyes relax; once he's off his feet, the set of his spine softens. He slumps, head tipped back; his curls fall away from his face and his neck, short enough that they're no longer able to catch on his shoulders. It exposes the brand of Hannibal's teeth high along the side of his throat. Hannibal has the passing thought that, now, knowing what he knows, all those little glimpses all along may have been deliberate. He huffs softly through his nose. Admires the scar all the same.

After a moment of quiet thought, Will changes the subject back. "Only a week to get my affairs in order and come after you?"

"Yes, it seems I overestimated." He leaves Will's bag where it lies on the floor in favor of its keeper. He crosses the sitting area until he stands before his new spouse: bride and groom, neither and both. Hannibal exhales softly, and holds out a hand. His own ring finger gleams in tones of silver and gold. "Come, Will. You're exhausted."

Will blusters out a breath. He barely cracks his eyes open. Fondly murmurs, "But I'm comfortable."

Hannibal bites back a smile. "I've sat in that chair, so I know that's not true."

Caught in the lie, Will's nose wrinkles. He has no right in looking as lovely as he does while making that face. Finally, he confesses, "I might actually be too tired to get up."

"A much more reasonable excuse." Hannibal bends at the waist until he's in Will's space, touches his lips to Will's forehead, and then his cheek. He soaks in the contented hum he receives, the way Will reaches up to touch him back. "Put your arms around my neck."

He hesitates, but only just. He does, and when Hannibal's arms slip around his back and under his thighs, Will's sound is not one of surprise, but one of relief. He nuzzles against Hannibal's shoulder, buries himself like it's his home to claim—and it is. Will's body is lax and soft and warm, a familiar and welcome weight that Hannibal carries with ease. They have done this more than once, under worse circumstances, but this…

Hannibal pauses just before the bedroom doorway; Will lifts his head with an idle frown as they come to a stop. Meets his eyes. And then he looks down. Sees the threshold.

It clicks.

Will's lips part, a soft expression of affection and understanding. When he looks up again, his head is tilted, inquiring. Reading the silent expression from Hannibal's face— *yes, my love, this is more than okay.*

"The first and the last," Will murmurs. He ducks his chin, presses his lips to Hannibal's neck. Hannibal's hands curl and flex, press into his tender flesh that's concealed beneath soft, travel-worn clothing. There may be pressure bruises in the morning; he guesses, if their exhaustion holds true, they will likely be the only marks he manages to leave tonight. But that's quite alright. Will already wears his teeth, now and forever. "I guess you were right."

Hannibal tilts his head, touches his cheek to the top of Will's head. They nuzzle like wolves, like mates, like kin. "I'm glad I was."

He steps over the threshold.

The bedroom is large, cream walls and pale floors and a large window overlooking the city below. The bed is dressed in rich red, king-sized and roomy; it's comfortable, though Hannibal has barely slept, too, since he arrived. The wooden posts stretch high, a canopy stretched above with its curtains tied open. Hannibal's instincts have not allowed him to make use of it, but he's sure the ability to close out the world and languish in darkness while recuperating might be of interest to Will. Perhaps in his company, it might even be something he's able to enjoy.

The adjacent bathroom is furnished in shades of sand and marble, with an ancient claw-foot tub and the style of shower curtain that Hannibal personally doesn't prefer, but it has a certain aesthetical appeal that he can appreciate. It's light and bright as the bedroom itself, opulent as Italy often manages without much effort simply due to its raw history, and its hand-in-hand association with value.

Of course, now, he is just glad he has a private place in which he can bring Will to rest. His beloved's lax limbs and bleary eyes say he sorely needs it.

"Restroom?" Hannibal asks. "Or to the bed?"

"I need to pee, but I think I can manage that myself," Will mumbles. Then, "My toothbrush is in my carry-on."

"I have one for you," Hannibal replies. After all, a toothbrush is a paltry expense in exchange for the simple but positive feeling that seeing the two together in the medicine cabinet gave him during the days Will was away. He had dared to hope. His faith has been rewarded.

"Presumptive," Will huffs. But his smile is telling.

"You're glad I presumed."

"I'm glad you weren't stupid enough to think that I don't love you." The words accompany a warm feeling, a certain tenderness and fondness. Hannibal sets Will onto the bed, but even as he retreats, Will is reaching after him. Snags him, catches Hannibal with a hand in the short strands of his hair. Not enough to hold him by, if Hannibal truly wanted to pull away, but he doesn't. Not when Will's eyes are so earnest, his mouth so soft. Not when he looks so clever and so longing all at once. "I love you, you know. Just in case you weren't aware."

Hannibal huffs through his nose. After the soliloquy he received in the confessional, there's not a single doubt in his heart or mind. The repetition is clearly Will's exhaustion talking, but how can he turn Will's reiteration away when it pleases him just the same? "Quite aware, my love. You told me—most ardently. I would be a fool not to believe you."

Will stares up at him. Something darkens in his face, a familiar glint. A familiar growl. His fingers curl harder, grip tighter. *"No."* He says. "Hannibal. I *love* you."

There's quite no point in arguing, he notes with both affection and amusement. "As I love you, Will," he murmurs.So all-consuming, so entirely—"You need your rest, darling. Come on."

Will is all but dead on his feet when he stands, holds out his arms and Hannibal finds the hem of his sweater and peels it upward. His eyes are bright blue, his hair wild; his chest slender and fine, so pale in the evening light in contrast with the black bralette he wears. Oh, Hannibal loved his longer hair, but he can love this, too—it's so easy to make Will unkempt and wild like this, to show his untamed

nature through outward affectations. He likes it. Likes the idea of it. To see Will running free at last, after everything…

Perhaps another day. He has waited this long, and he can surely wait longer, to know that Will knows what he is. Knows what he does. Knows what he longs for—quarry, and a quorum to run to.

He skims his hand along Will's waist, but takes it no further; stands and watches, waits, as Will finally huffs when it grows clear that this is all Hannibal intends to give. It's with a sigh that's as grateful as it is wanting; Hannibal's insides tighten at the thought of them falling together again, at what it might mean to have Will with him, unhinged—

Will turns and pads away with a breath, the black straps of his bra standing out starkly and creating a tapered silhouette with the high waist of his houndstooth leggings. His gait is clearly altered by the exhaustion he holds in his spine and in the soreness of his legs. It's with that reasoning in mind that Hannibal turns away and unbuttons his shirt, slides off his slacks and underwear, and dresses solely in a pair of soft, loose pajama pants. His body appreciates the freedom and the comfort.

Will stands in the doorway of the bathroom, and the curls around his face are damp, skin more or less clean of his makeup, save for what clings to his lash line. He looks more tired than originally presumed, having extensively hidden the depth of those dark circles with his foundation. His leggings are off, slung over his shoulder, and his weight is distributed unevenly as he slouches against the frame. Arms folded, head tilted, he watches Hannibal in fond silence, and Hannibal wonders if he's ever loved Will more. He lifts his chin, observes Will in return. There's something nostalgic and melancholy about the way Will looks at him now: something that feels distinctly older, more comfortable in his skin, and more lonely in his solitude—and in this moment, Hannibal wonders what changes and surprises Will might bring at age thirty, forty, beyond. He's changed so much already.

But perhaps Will has looked at him like this for a while. Perhaps in Hannibal's ignorance, he simply didn't notice. How many things were going on that he didn't notice, simply by nature of the fact that he didn't believe Will was capable? What a fool he had been. What glory he'd missed out on.

Hannibal meets Will's eyes, inclines his head, a silent indication that if Will has something to say, he should.

So he does. "When they told me you were gone, part of me really believed I might never see you again. When they told me there was a body, I forced them to bring me to it. I didn't know what I'd find, but based on their reactions, I knew it'd be something they'd expect me to break over." Will takes a moment. Presses his lips together, and Hannibal turns fully away from the bed. His chest flares with a strange sensation that has little to do with his own actions, and mostly to do with Will's reactions to them. He faces his new spouse and leans against one of the bedposts to listen; he doesn't like what he hears, but he's determined to hear it. "I had to give them what they expected. And to do that, I had to… compartmentalize myself, I guess. And part of me had to allow myself that you had died, that you were gone, and not only that you were beyond my reach, but that you were good and innocent and I had lost you in a terrible way and it was my fault."

Hannibal's brows draw together. There's a zing that hits him squarely in the chest at that. To think that what he had done had caused Will more undue pain, but—"You knew that wasn't true."

"I know. But once, it was my worst fear." Will's eyes flicker up to his, just for a second. "So I took that part of my heart and tore it out and let it bleed for all to see. The longer it went on, I think the less effective it became. It was too much for me to hold onto. On my way here, I thought I put it to bed for good, but I still feel like I'm on borrowed time. Like it's a fever dream, and if I go to bed and wake up in the morning it'll be September again, and school will be starting, and maybe we never met at all."

In a way, it sounds like a trauma response, albeit one that's entirely Will Graham. To dissociate himself so fully from the pain he caused himself that he can no longer believe the good was ever real at all, in order to invalidate the bad. It's a mental extreme. One he doesn't want to watch Will go through; one he may be able to reason him out of. "And what would you do, if that truly were the case?"

Will's eyes close and open again. His voice is slow, measured, and entirely certain. "I would hunt you down and do this all over again."

It's pleasing to hear. Hannibal smiles slightly, and feels his shoulders relax. And still, Will looks no more soothed than he did when Hannibal first asked him the question he couldn't answer.

He gentles his voice; it's strange to see it clearly, to know where the handle of the knife lies within Will's ribs. Sweet thing, so fierce and soft all at once. Hannibal tilts his head and observes him calmly. Quietly asks, "And if I didn't exist? If I were another aspect of your creation?"

Will winces; it's a lightning bolt of an expression, there and gone again, and it ricochets from Will to Hannibal and back again in such a way that he wonders if Will'll answer at all—but he answers. Averts his eyes. His voice is tense when he replies, "I don't know if someone like me could exist without someone like you. If you didn't, I—" He pauses. Looks at Hannibal directly. "I would have become you, I think, after my dad died. Or my morality would have won out. I would have felt myself losing control, and I would have put myself down, because I wouldn't have thought there was a place in the world for me to be as I am."

Something inside Hannibal tenses and sharpens, and he straightens his posture. That Will might've lost control when faced with his loneliness in the world, that would be an outcome Hannibal could logically see. But to think that he would destroy himself, rather than embrace his nature, rather than live and thrive—

Will moves, a series of slow steps across the room. He takes the leggings from his shoulder, drops them on the floor as he comes. He's left nearly bare, but Will wears his sheer undergarments like armor; stops before him, not closer or further than the length of an arm. He reaches out, and his fingertips touch Hannibal's sternum. His eyes linger on the ring of his teeth that's scarred on Hannibal's shoulder. "But I am," he says. "And my place is you."

Hannibal's lashes lower. There's something in the way he says it that implies he'd perhaps still fight it if he could. That without Hannibal, what he has admitted to as a beautiful spectre of incumbent death is something that may have died in its cradle. He doesn't like to think that Will would *never* have become this, even without him. Not when Will is so unique, so stunning, so brilliant on his own. "Is this a surrender, Will?"

"No. It is what it's always been." Will's hand slides to Hannibal's neck. The base of his throat. The tender arteries along the side. The angle of his jaw. His fingers are cold, and he shakes with exhaustion, but he doesn't show it; he looks up at Hannibal, pushes up on his toes, and the scent of mint and holy incense clings to his body as Will tips his head and murmurs against his mouth, "This is my becoming."

He kisses like Hannibal remembers; selfishly, desirously, with a hand around Hannibal's hip to drag him closer. What Will wants, he demands. He gives no quarter, even as he plies with offered tenderness and intimacy, soft touches and a gentle tongue, Hannibal is sure to never forget that behind his beloved's lips wait his teeth.

And rightly so—Will bites when Hannibal touches him, feasts his senses on the tactile sensation of slipping his palms over the tucked curve of Will's waist, feeling his skin when the gooseflesh raises when a moan is dragged from his own chest.

It's somehow better, now, given its recent absence.

They break apart, but Will holds him close, and Hannibal is hardly one to deny himself. They're both a few moments from their bodies simply giving up on them, but he'll gladly wear that down to the last second, if he must.

"For all my knowledge and intrusion," Hannibal murmurs, "I could never entirely predict you." His hands slip up Will's spine. "I fed the caterpillar," and pets over his hair, "whispered through the chrysalis," curves his hand around the nape of Will's neck, "but what hatched followed its own nature and was beyond me."

Will presses his mouth to Hannibal's shoulder, just as Hannibal touches his lips to the scar on Will's throat, still shiny and red. Chest to chest as they are, Hannibal can soak in his beloved's ambient warmth, and he thinks that maybe Will did bring warmer days with him, after all.

Will lifts his head, inhales slowly, and nuzzles at Hannibal's cheek. "Maybe I got there sooner than you thought, but I'm exactly where I wanted to be."

Hannibal huffs a quiet chuckle, all breath. "Get in bed," he says gently, and parts from Will with one final kiss to his temple. "I'll be right back."

By the time he's finished brushing his teeth, Will is near-asleep; curled toward Hannibal's side of the bed, he barely lifts his head when Hannibal closes the curtain on Will's side of the canopy, nor when he crawls in beside him. He stretches, arches, purrs when Hannibal wraps an arm around his waist and their legs twine together. Rests his head on Hannibal's bicep with an exhausted murmur, and tucks his face against Hannibal's chest and rubs his cheek against it.

"I know it's not much of a wedding night," Will whispers.

Hannibal strokes Will's hair back from his face. He admires the beauty of those dark curls highlighted by the two-toned gold on his own finger. "What more could I want, mylimasis? After everything, we made it here, we know the truth, and I'm married to you."

Will's expression says he doesn't buy it, and yet he's undeniably charmed, terribly beautiful in the way his eyes crinkle as he smiles. He reaches up and loops his arm around Hannibal's back, twines his fingers into the short hairs at the nape of his neck. Plays with them idly—and wonders how Will imagines them, like this. How Will's sense of power and control manifests in his mind's eye.

"We did make it, didn't we?" Will asks. He cradles the nape of Hannibal's neck and touches him like it's his right to do so, and it is. There's something about it that's settling. If he thinks back far enough, Will has always touched him like that; it's the same way Hannibal has touched him . They belong to one another and always have, body and soul.

"Yes, we did." He kisses the crown of Will's head. "And how do you feel, now that we have?"

Will hums. Considers it. Scritches his nails against Hannibal's scalp, a gentle, idle back and forth that raises shivers in his wake. "Safe," Will decides on, finally. "Even if we might not be for a little while, I'm not worried anymore, because I'm with you. And I'm happy." Touches his mouth just over

Hannibal's heart. His lips curve into a smile Hannibal can feel against his chest. "Like, insanely happy." He sighs. It's a blissful sound, a warm breath against his skin. "You?"

"In a way that borders on obscene, or perhaps divine. Though perhaps it's more clear to me now than ever that the standard belief of a meritocracy for those given blessings is entirely fabricated." Hannibal dares not move or shift. Having Will like this, relaxed against him, warm, affectionate, *knowing,* is something he had nearly believed he'd never have. "I find myself looking forward to the morning, and all those after it."

"Mm," Will murmurs fondly. "Me too." Then, "How long will we stay here?"

"How long do you want to?"

"Longer than we should." Will huffs a quiet sigh. "I paid in cash but my flight was direct. It won't take them long."

"Perhaps we can double back." Will makes an intrigued sound, and Hannibal continues, "Continue onward for a number of weeks or months. We have anywhere in the world we can go. We could take another flight, we could drive; within Italy, there are a number of places also accessible by ferry."

"It would be harder to track us on the ground." Will nuzzles against him, and settles finally with a heavy sigh. "If we drive, we can go wherever we want until we don't want to anymore."

"An extended honeymoon," Hannibal replies.

It sinks in. Will's hand curls against Hannibal's chest, threads through the hair there. He nuzzles in closer. "That sounds really nice."

"Then that's what we'll do." Hannibal rests chin atop Will's head. The contented murmur he gets in response is worth Will's weight in gold. "I'll arrange a vehicle in the morning. From there, we can go wherever you'd like to go."

"Wherever *we'd* like to go." Will untucks his head from where it rests against his chest, rubs his cheek over his pulse and kisses the underside of Hannibal's jaw. "We're not alone anymore. We're in this together."

Sweet, devoted thing. Dangerously competent, protective, possessive. And he's right, isn't he?

"We won," Will murmurs. "And we're here, and you're mine, and I love you."

"As I love you." Hannibal smooths his palm down Will's spine. The contented arch and quiet purr he receives in response are balms to his mind, and he could think of a thousand more words to say, but he doesn't; their time would be better spent in restfulness. In peace, finally earned. In this sweet and precarious feeling of safety. Will's claws flex against his back, the slightest, sweetest sting to see him off into dreams. Ensconced in the darkened den made of the king-sized canopy bed, the monster inside him curls around his mate and settles in for sleep.

When Will awakens, it's to the scent of coffee and an empty bed. He pouts about this for only as long as it takes to hear motion in the kitchen, to reach out and still feel warmth in the sheets, and to decide

that, well, some things probably won't change so much, after all.

He gets up and peels the bralette off to spare his ribs any more discomfort, and snags Hannibal's button-down shirt from where it rests. Brushes his teeth and detangles the mess of his hair, then puts it back up. His stubble's growing in again, a slight shadow on his jaw. The last vestiges of last night's eye makeup clings to his face. With Hannibal's shirt loose around his chest, lace underwear clinging to his hips and ass, a vague smoke around his lashes… he looks… good. Tired, maybe, but happy.

Maybe he's changing. Maybe he's just getting older, or it's what he knows, and that cancels out the rest. But when Will looks at himself in the bathroom mirror, he sees himself as much now as he did yesterday in the airport. Maybe even more now than the first time he saw himself in a gown, or in Margot's clothing.

But maybe it's less about his face, and more about his eyes. More about what he can see in them: a wolf in sheep's clothing. The kind or cut or color depends on the day, but the wolf remains.

Will finds Hannibal exactly where he expects, working over the range with something that sizzles and smells like meat. He hasn't eaten much in what feels like days, and between coffee and breakfast, Will's starting to not be too put out, after all.

Still. He has an obligation.

He places his cheek against the back of Hannibal's shoulder, loops his arms around his waist. He purrs. "I hope whatever you're cooking makes up for the fact that you left me to wake up alone in our marriage bed."

Hannibal chuckles, rich and warm. "If it's any consolation, I meant to bring it *to* our marriage bed when I was done with it."

It looks like some sort of scramble, eggs and peppers and sausage. The color and scent of the meat tells Will all he needs to know about it; he smiles, but doesn't bring it up. Heads instead for the coffee. Pours himself a cup, and smiles when he feels Hannibal's eyes rest heavily on Will's turned back.

"Mm," Will says, and takes a sip. "Well, then I guess I'll just have to take this back with me."

When Will casts a look back over his shoulder, Hannibal has arched a brow in response. His hands move deftly, but his attention is clearly elsewhere. Will smiles.

"Come find me when you're done," he calls as he retreats toward the bedroom. "We can try that again."

Behind him, Hannibal huffs.

Will knows he doesn't have long, but he's in no hurry; he sets his cup of coffee down on the bedside table, and then busies himself tying back the canopy's curtains. Opening the heavy drapes that cover the enormous picture window that looks over the city. It's bright, today—the sun is out, and if any snow ever stuck at all, it's certainly all melted. There's no trace of frost clinging to the glass.

It's so different from home. And yet, that's almost what it feels like.

Will peels off his underwear. Unbuttons the shirt, and lets it fall. Then he sprawls on his back in the sheets, stretches luxuriously with his arms above his head, and well aware that they're high enough up that no one will see him, Will allows himself to rest nude in the sunlight.

It doesn't take long. Will didn't expect it to. And Hannibal doesn't pause as he enters, aside from to cast Will an appreciative look as he sets the tray at the foot of the bed; a pair of bowls and cutlery. He sets the carafe of coffee on the side table, next to Will's cup.

"Gonna join me?" Will murmurs.

There's something in the tilt of Hannibal's head, the hunger in his eyes, that tells Will his monster is quite interested, indeed. "I'm unsure if I've ever eaten a meal without clothing."

"First time for everything." He rolls onto his side toward Hannibal and props his chin on his hand. The strength of his shoulders, the power of his core, the width of his legs; all of it's being denied to him by the fall of Hannibal's clothing, and Will doesn't appreciate that one bit. Will trails his nails gently across the sheets beside him. "Come on."

Hannibal starts with his shirt; white and plain, rolled up around his forearms in that way Will loves and hates. How he manages to cook entire meals and not get anything on them, Will has no idea—but doesn't spare much of a thought to it, as he watches each button pried apart, the skin revealed beneath. Tips his chin up and glances through his lashes when Hannibal meets his eyes, a silent *go on* that is answered with a soft huff of breath. He's much less fussy about the pants; pushes them down over his hips and steps out of them in favor of prowling onto the mattress, skin and muscles shifting like a wildcat, and *oh*...

"Good morning," Hannibal murmurs, and licks at the seam of Will's mouth, tempts him open and hovers over him, kisses him wet and deep until Will feels electricity in his teeth.

They break apart quickly; after all, Hannibal is not one to waste food, or to allow it to be eaten past its prime. Will licks the saliva from his lips and arches idly in bed as Hannibal retrieves the tray and drags it toward them. "Better. Much better."

"I'm glad to provide where I am able." Hannibal sends Will an amused glance as he adjusts his posture to sit upright against the headboard at the center of the bed, a pillow tucked behind his back. He holds the bowl carefully in his hand—

Will picks his food up off the tray; lies on his stomach across Hannibal's lap, braces his forearms against the mattress. Though he's warm and solid, there's nothing particularly titillating about his soft cock trapped under Will's belly aside from the thought of it—at least, until it's both squishy and firm beneath his abdomen. Will hums idly; doesn't move, though he thinks about it, and scoops a bite up with his fork. "You can put it on my back, you know. I'm not gonna bite."

As directed, Hannibal places his bowl atop Will's spine. It's hot to the touch, but not unpleasantly so. Hannibal's fingers wander the expanse of Will's bared skin. "Is it customary to use your spouse as makeshift furniture during breakfast in bed?"

"Depends on the type of party," Will snorts, and takes another bite. Definitely Hannibal's meat of choice. He hums his pleasure at the taste. For all that he hasn't had long to collect, there's certainly no shortage of quality. "I just wanted to be lazy and be near you at the same time."

Hannibal's knuckles drift upward toward Will's shoulders, his neck. He touches just behind Will's ear, right along his hair line. Presses. Will tilts his head to the side, but otherwise, allows Hannibal his exploration. "Does it ever hurt?

"Mm," Will replies, "Not really. It was sore for a while. And itchy. But I think it's healing nicely."

Hannibal touches it idly. Eats. Then, “It’s starting to fade in places.”

Will’s mouth pulls toward a smirk. He hides it. Chews and swallows. “I guess you’ll have to fix it at some point, then.”

A scrape of metal against porcelain. Hannibal’s thumb presses just a little bit harder. “Did you enjoy the experience the first time?”

Did he *enjoy* it? His soul all but ascended his body. Will’s mouth is dry when he replies, “Yeah.” Licks his lips. He chases a piece of sausage around the bottom of the bowl with the tines of his fork. “It was… intimate. And now I always have proof that I’m yours.”

A moment of quiet passes. A breath.

“Ah,” Hannibal says. “That reminds me.” And then the bowl is lifted away from Will’s back and is placed on the side table, and Hannibal’s thighs press up against Will’s stomach—“Just a moment, darling,”— and he leans over.

The drawer rolls quietly open. Hannibal’s hand is pressed firmly to the middle of Will’s back as he stretches, reaches, leaves the drawer open, and comes back with a box.

He taps Will twice on the spine. Will’s heart skips a beat as he pushes himself up onto his knees and sits back on his heels; Hannibal takes Will’s bowl and leans over to place it beside its fellow. Then he holds out a hand.

Will crawls into his lap, sits astride his thighs; he steadies himself on Hannibal’s shoulders, and his stomach clenches at the sight of black velvet, even though they’re already—“I meant to have this with me when I saw you again, but it seems you were determined to get here before I was ready for you. And given the events of last night, we were both sufficiently distracted. I realize now that this is more of a wedding gift than anything else—”

He’s clearly both amused and exasperated, but Will doesn’t care. He doesn’t care about tradition. None of this is traditional. “Hannibal, show me.”

The band is a gleaming gradient, gold toned on one side that slowly fades to silver; it’s flat, unornamented as to not draw the eye away from the shift. A triangular section is removed from the center where the two sides should meet again—and in the negative space is a brilliant-cut, tension-set diamond.

It’s simple, so unlike Hannibal’s many gifts for him in the past; Will also notes with some amusement and amazement that they seem to have been of a mind on the two-tone color. But the thing that strikes him about this ring is how *flat* it is, unobtrusive, unlike so many engagement rings—

—and it’s distinctively lovely, without being excessively feminine. Something he can wear always, no matter how he presents, without it seeming out of place.

“It’s perfect,” Will says at once, and Hannibal’s face brightens with pleased pride. He doesn’t wait. The Ripper doesn’t wait. He doesn’t ask, because the Ripper never asks. But Hannibal takes it from the box and takes Will’s hand from where it rests on his shoulder, feeds it over Will’s knuckles and slides it home.

It fits comfortably. Perfectly.

“And now,” he replies, “we have a socially-acceptable form of proof that you are mine and I am yours.”

Will threads his fingers into Hannibal’s hair and leans in to kiss him. He arches idly when Hannibal’s palms settle at his lower back. “I don’t care about socially acceptable.”

“Nor I. Though it does seem to draw fewer questions.” Hannibal’s lashes lower; his gaze catches on Will’s mouth and drifts upward, lingers before he, too, leans in again and sinks his teeth so softly into Will’s lip, drinks his affection as he might drink wine, like blood.

And Will likes Hannibal like this; caught beneath his weight, beholding Will like he himself is the pillar of a new religion. His love. His husband. His beloved monster. “Speaking of questions, and socially acceptable…” Will purrs against his cheek, and presses into the jealous, wanting grip of Hannibal’s hands. “What did he do?”

Hannibal draws back, just enough to look at Will directly. His head is tilted, inquiring, but in his eyes is something flat and dark and terribly smart. It smiles without smiling. So clever that even in Hannibal’s silence, it never stops bragging. “Who?”

“The person you just fed me,” Will replies. He drums his fingers gently on the nape of Hannibal’s neck and deeply savors the shiver that traverses his spine. Closes that distance again, rubs his rough cheek against Hannibal’s temple, and his breath catches when Hannibal’s fingers tighten around his waist. “What did he do? I’m assuming it was someone other than the woman who didn’t tell you I’d arrived last night. You didn’t have enough time. So it had to be someone else.”

Hannibal’s hips and thighs flex beneath him. He exhales slowly, harshly through his nose, and his hands flex. His cock, half hard, thickens against Will’s ass. Intrigued, pleased, Will pushes back against him. “There was a man outside the airport who believed me to be a tourist, and thought to pickpocket me. I allowed him to take my wallet, and then I followed him home and killed him.”

Will hums at the hot fall of breath against his throat, the tease of jagged fangs. “What did you take?”

“Anything that seemed worth taking.” An aborted gasp when Will drags his teeth over the shell of Hannibal’s ear. He spreads his legs and drops his weight so Hannibal can rut up against his cock until they’re both hard. “And then I split him into pieces and dumped his remains in the chum vats that will be used in the Mediterranean.”

Will barks out a laugh that cuts into a moan when Hannibal slips one hand between them to gently knead at Will’s balls. Oh, God, this is probably pretty fucked up, but who cares? Who *cares?* Hannibal is *his* and there is no one in the world who will better appreciate how fucked up Will can be.

“Hannibal Lecter is dead,” Will says breathlessly. “Long live Hannibal Lecter.”

Hannibal growls; leans forward and laves over one of Will’s nipples, shoots electricity through his chest down to his gut. He sucks it red and hot and wet, grabs it between his teeth and clamps down it until it’s sore and bruising, the skin partially broken; Will whines and twitches away, but Hannibal holds him fast. Continues on until Will’s breaths are heavy, until his hips can’t stay still and he’s writhing against Hannibal’s cock, pressed between his thighs. Then he switches to the other.

“Ow, ah, *fuck,”* he gasps, and tugs viciously at Hannibal’s hair. The first still throbs even once Hannibal lets it go—until he catches it between his fingers and rolls it and *oh, God.* “Hannibal, oh *Jesus—”*

His eyes are black when he lifts them to Will's face, stares up at him, and it's clearly useless but fuck, it's *hot* to think Hannibal could make him leak there if he tried hard enough. Or maybe he intends to unsheathe his teeth and eat straight through to Will's heart, plain and simple. Will wouldn't even tell him no. But Hannibal pulls away from Will's other nipple with a visible roll of his tongue, sucking the sticky strings of his saliva away. His mouth shines with it.

Will licks his lips; it's a sympathetic gesture, but he can't stop himself. His pupils fatten with adrenaline, but the sunlight is blinding as it streams through the windows and lights Hannibal up like he's bright inside, divine. Gold and tan, thick muscle and coarse hair. His chest rubs against Will's ribs and his belly, the friction enough to spark skin to flame.

And then Hannibal's hand on Will's slips under, slips back, and he rubs at Will's entrance. Toys with it, and Will bares his teeth and twitches and gasps—

There's something in Hannibal's eyes that's almost inhuman, fierce and wild and entirely engrossed with his mate. But alongside it, a contentedness that speaks to the monster's complete, unchallenged control.

And, well. Will's just not the type of creature to lie back for the sake of anyone's ego.

"Lube?" he asks breathlessly, and Hannibal exhales sharply through his nose; taps Will's hip to signal for him to lift his weight up and off so he can move, lean and reach for the bedside table—

Will lurches forth all at once; braces his weight on his hands and swings his legs forward. He vaults from the bed and hits the ground with enough force it jolts his knees, but he doesn't care. Hannibal's head snaps up, his eyes narrowed and almost entirely black, ringed with his natural red in a way that's so far from natural—

He faces Hannibal and takes a step backward. Then another.

Slowly, like a great cat stalking its prey, Hannibal places his hand flat on the table to brace himself and provide a pivot point; he doesn't, Will notices, take the tube from the drawer. His nostrils flare. Hannibal's at the disadvantage in terms of posture. Will was counting on that. It'll give him a head start.

Will grins. Running from the Ripper—it feels like outrunning a hurricane. Namely, it won't happen. He's counting on that, too.

"I chased you here," Will says; his heart pounds in his chest, and he can feel it in his limbs. His fingers, his toes. His throat. His cock. "Your turn."

And he runs.

He doesn't make it far, but he doesn't have to, or even want to. His heart pounds thick and huge inside his mouth, blood pumping behind his eyes so hard that all he sees is red. He can still taste the meal in his mouth, the spices worked into the meat. He follows the scent to where it originated, and makes it from the bedroom to the hallway before a hand snags him around the wrist—

Will snaps his teeth and *oh fuck,* his belly clenches *hard* when Hannibal shifts his weight, his incredible strength, starts to drag him backward.

But does he think he can just tug Will along like a bitch on a leash? Will lashes out behind him, strikes ribs, and rips himself away; the inertia propels him into a wall, but he deflects off it with a huff

keeps going. Runs again until his feet touch tile, until he's caught again. Caught *better,* with one arm high around his chest and the other low around his gut. He shudders when Hannibal snarls against his ear, and Wilhemina snarls right back, voice sharp with her insult and her delight as Will ducks his head and sinks his teeth into Hannibal's bicep enough to taste blood—

Hannibal seizes him by the face, digs his fingers into the hinge of Will's jaw hard enough to force him to part. His teeth leave flesh. Will licks the blood from his lips and looks back over his shoulder to hiss a warning—

Gravity abandons him. Will hits the floor on his shoulder and hip as Hannibal throws him down; strong fingers spread and dig in and hook around the fleshy crest of Will's pelvis and flip him facedown. Will bucks; Hannibal seizes him by the back of the neck and pushes until Will's arms give out and his shoulders meet the floor, and a wild peal of laughter rips from his lungs. Because this, *this* is what it feels like to not have to hold back. *This* is what it means to be the Bride of the Ripper, what it means to know himself and know his instincts, to act and *react,* and be reacted to in turn.

Something wet and warm drips on his back that smells like iron; Will realizes that Hannibal is *bleeding* on him, holding him down with one arm as he uses the other to reach up onto the counter for —

Will kicks out and connects with Hannibal's leg with enough force to knock him off balance. It backfires; his back pulses with pain and his belly with pleasure as Hannibal catches himself by falling on Will, pins him with his body as whatever he was reaching for tumbles and falls with a sound of glass-on-glass.

Hannibal pushes himself back up again with a growl deep in his chest, the warning of all feral things with violent natures to *stay where I put you.* Will's cock twitches against the tile, smears precome beneath his body as his nipples twinge with cold and pain as he's pressed against the floor. Hannibal's hand tightens around the nape of Will's neck, digs in with claws, no longer a warning, but a threat.

Drip, goes the blood on his back. *Drip,* as his dick leaks against the floor. *Drip,* as Hannibal hisses his success and pushes Will's legs apart with his knee, then pours the spout of oil directly over his hole, over his cock and balls, thick pools beneath them on marble like old and furious gods fucking and fighting for all eternity—and Will's done fighting.

Will pushes his own bruised knees out further, gets them underneath his weight so he can angle his hips back and up and make this good for both of them. Risk and reward requires both things, and he wants the reward so bad it hurts. Wants it bad enough that he whines for it, reaches back with imploring hands and pitches his voice sweet, puts his cheek against the floor and bares his neck to the monster above him.

"Fuck me," Will whispers through his teeth, and full-body shudders at the drip of oil down his cock, the temperature enough of a chill to be a shock—and gets nothing. Will blinks, looks back over his shoulder; Hannibal's head is cocked, his eyes dark, and a corner of his mouth tips upward as his hand slips up into Will's bound hair and pulls *hard* until Will yelps and swears, howls his frustration to the ceiling. His eyes water and sting and he squeezes them shut. He'd be more than happy to lie here and *take it* if Hannibal were actually *doing* anything; Will sighs out an explosive breath and opens his eyes, and Hannibal stares down at him like a bug below a magnifying glass, caught inside a focused sunbeam and starting to smoke.

When he arches back, Hannibal pushes him down again, holds him fast and ready to mount but *doesn't mount him,* and isn't that just the fucking bitch of it? Will lets out a pitiful, terrible sound of frustrated, overwhelmed, understimulated agony—

And Will nearly screams when the fat head of a cock pushes blunt and thick against his hole and pushes inside. He gasps and Hannibal *moans,* but he gives Will no time to breathe—it's no sooner than his hips meets the back of Will's thighs that he has pulled out and fucked in again, again, again, holding Will where he's weak at the neck and rolling his hips so that every thrust splits him open just a little bit better, a little bit deeper. Will's legs prickle with how tightly they're folded with the way he's being held down; they spark lightning up his spine, and he's not sure at first whether he's trying to squirm away or closer, even if he can't move very much at all—

Oh, and Will gasps, wails when that weight grows even more intense, as Hannibal drapes himself over Will's back and wraps his bitten arm around Will's chest, smears him with blood and oil and fucks him into the tile with such force that his knees and shoulders throb with impact pain, that his nipples are just one erogenous zone gone crazy as they rock and push against the freezing floor with every shove of Hannibal's shaft into his body.

He feels trussed. Like a prize. Like prey. Captured and strapped down in only the best ways, the most feral of instincts, the most basic of their kind. His mate is the strongest, the smartest, the most stubborn, and he'll do exactly with Will as he wants, knowing those wants are aligned.

And then Hannibal rolls his hips in, *up,* and pleasure hits Will hard in the gut, squeezes around his intestines like Hannibal could open him up, rearrange him inside with more than just his cock. He reaches back on instinct, pulls *hard* at Hannibal's hair, scrapes his nails down the side of his neck as he whines, high and desperate in his throat. When he can't hold himself up, his hand drops back and he hooks his claws into the flex and bulge of his thigh. "Oh please, *please, Hannibal, there."*

Hannibal exhales hard and makes a gritted, strained sound of acknowledgement; Will clenches *hard,* desperate to give as good as he gets, and tilts his head, rubs his cheek against whatever of Hannibal's face he can reach. Hannibal's rhythm stutters as Will pulls him in and pushes back, tightens up around his dick so he can hardly pull back out.

"Will," he moans, almost pained. "Oh—"

Will rolls himself into the next thrust, and his words are are punched out as a harsh, breathy whisper. "Come on, put your teeth in me. Hold me still while you fuck me." Hannibal growls softly; nips at Will's ear, edges his teeth along his pounding pulse, but Will *knows* Hannibal knows what he meant, and he knows what he *wants.* Will unsheathes his claws from Hannibal's thigh and reaches beneath them, smears his hand through the oil and precome on the floor, then squeezes his fingers tight around his cock. Drops his head forward, away from Hannibal's mouth—

The arm around Will's chest and neck wrenches him back with as much ferocity as if Will had tried to run. Hannibal snaps his hips, snaps his teeth closed, and it comes out of nowhere as he shoves up against Will's prostate and his brain bursts with pain and Will's hand slips up his cock and he can smell their blood together and Will just fucking snaps.

It's a terrible, animal howl that he makes, but holy *shit* does it feel *incredible;* Will's body seizes and pulls strangled whines from him as his muscles twitch and spark and seize, as his legs shake uncontrollably, as he comes all over his fingers, and Hannibal realizes at once what has happened and fucks him fast and deep, drags Will back onto his cock and grinds in and worries his teeth to reopen that scar, and it is—

God, it's so much. Will leans back into Hannibal's teeth with a dry, overwhelmed sob, squirms on his dick as he pushes deep in slow, momentous pushes, and snarls so that Will feels it in his spine.

Oh, fuck, it hurts. It hurts *good,* but it *hurts.*

Hannibal holds him, nuzzles him, and Will reaches up to pillow his forehead on his forearm so he doesn't get smeared into the tile by their combined weight. But when he shifts, he frowns, and can't quite turn his head, but—

"Go on," Will murmurs. "I know you're close, keep fucking me."

A hesitant moment; Hannibal slowly extracts his teeth from Will's neck and reflexively laps over the wound, the beading, dripping blood. They'll both bear marks from tonight. It seems that'll be the nature of their future together, and Will can't say he regrets it even a little.

"It may hurt," Hannibal replies, voice gravely with disuse. "If you're overstimulated—"

"Let it hurt. Fuck me anyway."

A quiet breath, but Hannibal is not one to deny himself; he's right, though, it *does* hurt, and Will's body is sore and each thrust forces a whimper through his teeth, what felt pleasurable before is now just *so much* in such a way that he's not even sure how his brain usually interprets that much sensation as pleasurable. But his thrusts are deep and slick, and now that he's actively able to fuck in a way that's pleasurable solely to him…

Will ends up on his belly in the mess, Hannibal's hands powerful and controlling on his hips. He moves less than he moves Will, and there's something viscerally fucking arousing about being manhandled like this; Will's legs spread wider of his own behest and he tilts his hips, becomes something hot and wet for Hannibal to fuck and fill, and he wonders if in a different world they might someday—

Hannibal's claws dig into Will's lower back and clutch him near. He grinds in slow, syncopated thrusts, exhales quiet and breathy sounds that are not moans so much as gasps at having his desires stoked and soothed. Will moans softly into the floor, clenches as he's filled, feels everything all soft and hot and wet—

"Oh, fuck," Will sighs. His legs shake. His body hurts. Blood drips down his neck, his own come drips from his hand, and Hannibal's leaks from his body as he pulls out, and Will likes everything about it. "God*damn,* baby, I missed you."

"I missed you too, mylimasis." Hannibal touches him with soothing, savage certainty in his own welcome. Will likes that, too. "I think we could use a bath, and you could use a bandage. Perhaps not in that order."

"Mmph." Will closes his eyes and drops his head against his forearms. His brain drifts, puddles like so many fluids on the floor. "If that's what the doctor ordered."

Hannibal laughs under his breath, and the sound of it is so low, so warm, Will may as well already be submerged. Oh, it's heaven. "My darling love, if I still have a medical license by the new year, I'll be shocked."

Exhausted, contented, fading as he is, at the humor in Hannibal's voice, Will can't help but smile. "Shame," he says. "I kinda liked the coat."

After their morning excursion, Will's exhaustion rears its head with a vengeance, and after they shower and he shaves the stubble away, Will spends most of the day dozing. Hannibal kisses him thoroughly and puts him to bed with a promise to return once he arranges a vehicle for them. At his own insistence, they can leave in the morning.

They have a late lunch made from the pickpocketer's flank steaks, sliced and fried with onions, peppers, potatoes, and chili-ginger paste, simmered with tomato and garlic, then served over a bed of rice. "Lomo saltado," Hannibal had said, "a Peruvian dish, fairly informal, but calorie-rich and delicious."

"Peruvian." Will raised his brows at him over the small café-style table in the sitting room. "We're in Italy, and you're making Peruvian food?"

"There's no reason our travel can't be multicultural." He'd shot Will a wry look, one that did absolutely nothing to disguise his amusement when Will took and bite and his eyes closed with bliss. "Satisfying?"

"Yes. But I think you just wanted something quick and easy to make that I've never had so we can clean out what you had in the freezer before we leave."

Hannibal had cleared away the plates and simply said, "Perhaps."

Will had felt some small level of guilt for being a layabed while in a city as culturally rich as Palermo, but Hannibal had simply brushed Will's bangs away from his face and told him not to pay it mind. That they'd have other chances to return when the circumstances weren't so strenuous.

To prove he truly felt he wasn't missing anything, he'd climbed back into bed with Will shortly thereafter. Whether or not any sleeping was done is, Will thinks, quite beside the point.

They languish in the tangled sheets, Will sprawled over Hannibal's chest and tucked beneath his arm as he reads idly on his tablet. Will scrolls through his new phone as his contacts and photographs import, and glances up at the bright red header of a familiar website. He grimaces. "Why are you still reading TattleCrime?"

"My site of choice seems to have been taken off the web," Hannibal replies drolly. "Such a shame. I do hope nothing's happened to the author. Just look what happened to this one."

"Oh, yes," Will drawls. "What a terrible thing. Can't imagine who would have done that to her. There are some truly depraved people out there."

Hannibal perks up. He looks almost flattered. "Depraved."

"Do you have a different word?"

"It implies a level of brutality and originality. I think depraved is an accurate term."

Will huffs and sighs and smiles, the bitten side of his neck up to the air. It's scabbed already, wounds held closed with steri-strips, and will be covered with nonstick gauze before they travel again. For now, though, he simply allows himself to rest safely in the arms of his creature, his killer, his husband. "Great. I'll make a mental note for the next time I have a website where I write about the people you kill."

"A diary would be perfectly acceptable."

“A *diary,”* Will repeats incredulously. “You want me to keep a diary?”

“A journal, perhaps. No reason to stop practicing your talent. Use it or lose it, as they say.”

“I’m not keeping a journal just because you have a hard-on for when people tell you how great you are. You’re a high-class European who’s smart enough to beat Alex Trebek at Jeopardy while he’s holding the cards. People are always gonna line up to lick your boots. You don’t need me to do it.”

Hannibal sounds terribly amused at that. “Do I often wear boots for others to lick?”

“You could stand to wear them more often, maybe, since I think a pair of sneakers would just straight-up kill you.”

“I certainly don’t prefer them. Boots, though. They have the opportunity to be well-made and functional, depending on the pastime of the wearer. What they do and where they go. Strong structural support.”

“Oh my god, shut up.” Will rolls his eyes. “The only pair you ever owned was in your basement. And I’m not convinced you didn’t just put the hazmat suit over your trousers and dress shoes.”

“At times I did,” Hannibal replies with a half-cocked smirk. Bastard. “But I preferred functionality whenever possible.”

“How were your normal suits functional, then?” Will retorts.

Hannibal raises a brow and looks so terribly pleased with himself when he says “High society cultural camouflage—bespoke sheepskin.”

Will doesn’t understand how a man so fiercely intelligent can have such a terrible sense of humor. “Sheepskin’s not the only skin to hide under. Leather’s just as nice.”

“That can be arranged.”

Will’s eyes slide to him in the periphery, immediately intrigued. Hannibal in all-black is already a figure that strikes Will’s id. But to see him in leather, sleek and fine and wearing the skins of things not as powerful, proof of his conquest… “Arrange it, then.”

And Hannibal, too, looks intrigued. He lowers the tablet to his lap, its screen still bright as he cocks his head, as his eyes go half-lidded with heat and some private pleasure that Will might call vindication if he had no better word to call it—

The tablet pings. Their eye contact is broken and Hannibal’s brows draw together with a sort of faint puzzlement; Will cranes his neck fruitlessly as Hannibal lifts it and looks, taps at a notification on the screen that casts the light on his face from shadowed to white as it loads, and then—

“What is it?” Will gently headbutts his chest and wiggles in an attempt to get a better vantage point. “That was an SMS ping. *Analysis* is down, so it’s something else.”

“I put an alert on our names.” Will has only a moment to absorb this as Hannibal’s eyes flicker across the page and slowly light from inside. His mouth twists with a smirk, and his arm tightens around Will at his side. “It looks like we’re making headlines in Baltimore.”

“What?” Will budges closer, and Hannibal lowers the tablet so Will can see:

The Chesapeake Ripper's Christmas Rampage: *The FBI's key witness vanishes from thin air! Inside the cross country search for Will Graham…*

Johns Hopkins Jinxed? *Two doctors, one hospital, one day. Behind the lives of the Chesapeake Ripper's two latest victims.*

BREAKING NEWS: Murder Victim's Identity Obscured! *Intern cracks the code! Healthy doctor's murder in doubt after blood tests show latest victim had Type 1 Diabetes.*

"You used a diabetic?" Will asks incredulously.

Hannibal, too, looks mildly interested at that. "It's strange I didn't notice. Type One diabetics usually have insulin pumps. He must've injected himself very recently before I took him if I didn't notice—but as I said, this was not to my usual standard. Not nearly as much research beforehand as I'd prefer."

Will takes the tablet from him and clicks on the last link; he reads, then sighs. "Of course Bev was the one who found it."

"Miss Katz always did seem exceptionally bright." Perhaps Will's shoulders are tense, for Hannibal reaches over with one hand and kneads at them. He says, "No matter what they've found, it will take them time if they want to come after us. International jurisdiction is not so simple as jumping on a plane."

"You've already killed someone, Hannibal," Will murmurs back; not unhappily. Just quietly. "If someone finds the remains and they put two and two together once they find my airport footage, it would be enough to warrant cooperation between Italian Police and ours." A breath. He wants to say the words, but he doesn't, because part of him has no desire to do what he's suggesting, but—

Hannibal knows. He always knows. "Would it ease your mind if we were to leave sooner than later?" His grip slides to the back of Will's neck, steady and comforting. "We could disappear now. Tonight."

Once, not very long ago, Will had forced a blanket of logic over his desire to run. He had delayed them, if only by a few days, and it had nearly cost him everything.

He's not going to make that mistake a second time.

But his heart pounds in his chest, uncertain, as Will looks up at him. Takes in the quiet calmness of his face, the pure and unbothered contentment. It eases him, somehow. That he and Hannibal have made it through all of this. That he seems to truly believe they will continue to do so.

Because of course Hannibal would follow him anywhere. Of course he would.

"Maybe I'm paranoid, but I'd rather be safe with you than sorry and alone." Will leans back into Hannibal's grip, soothed at the thumb that presses gently on his bite mark. A commitment renewed. Trust cemented. "I know you wanted to stay longer."

"I know *you* wanted to stay longer. A good thing, then, that as long as we remain unapprehended, we can return someday."

Will tilts his chin up, heedless of the stretch and sting it causes to his neck. He rumbles his pleasure when he's rewarded with a kiss. "By that logic, the sooner we leave, the sooner we can come back again."

Hannibal smiles. It's a small thing that lowers his lashes, sharpens the corners of his smile. But it shines through his face, his body, when he replies, "Then my answer to both is *very soon."* He sits up straight in bed, stretches idly. Draws back the covers and stands. "I'll find you a backpack. Anything you can't fit, leave it. We can purchase it when we stop again."

Will frowns at his back. "Not my carry-on?"

"No." Hannibal bends at the waist and retrieves a shirt. Pulls it on, and pads away. "We're traveling lightly."

Will thinks of the rectangular bag—Hannibal's own. Small, unobtrusive. He frowns as he carefully swings his legs over the side of the mattress, steadies himself on the canopy beam. His ring catches the light, and for a moment, Will absorbs the sight of it, and of Hannibal in the background, and doesn't move at all. "I'm sure whatever car you got can fit it."

Hannibal pauses in the threshold of the bathroom. He looks so terribly pleased with himself that Will, too, stops and stares, and—

"Darling," Hannibal says, "Who said anything about a car?"

They stand in the dark below, on some narrow street that feels weathered with moonlight and lampglow and age, and Will has been breathless since the moment Hannibal put on the black boots and the dark jeans and that leather jacket. He's less of a man than a shadow, less of a shadow than an omen, less of an omen than a god made flesh *wearing* flesh.

He's beyond belief. And yet, somehow, against all odds…

He holds out his hand, and Will places into it a small, soft bag that contains his father's old ceramic dog, well-packed. Hannibal places it in the side saddle bag of a sleek black motorcycle. "Is that all of it?"

"I can wear my backpack with the rest," Will replies, and adjusts it on his shoulder. "If that's alright."

"As long as the straps hold the weight close to your body, then yes, that'll be just fine." Hannibal straightens up and looks over at him.

The night is somehow not as cold as Will might've imagined, considering it was flaking snow not long ago. It's nothing like a Wolf Trap winter, that's for sure. And yet Hannibal's eyes linger on Will's uncovered hands and lightweight sweatshirt like they're personally offensive to him. Will's shoulders tense. "Don't frown like that. It's not like I had anything else to wear."

Hannibal rounds the bike to the opposite saddle bag with a considering sound; the zipper *whirrs,* and then—"I had thought you might prefer this instead."

Will's words catch in his throat.

It's white, buttery and velvet-soft in his bare hands, and when he unrolls it, he cannot help the way his heartbeat stalls at the bright silver of the asymmetrical zipper, the vertical tracks across the chest and horizontally across the ribs for the pockets, the deep folds of the collar and silver snaps at the points—and the way it lengthens in the back, flares out around the hips in a peplum-style skirt. In the back is a black tag and a silver nameplate on a chain; it reads *Alexander McQueen.*

"Oh," Will breathes.

"There are gloves in the pocket," Hannibal says with a mild inclination of his head. Somehow, in the low light, his eyes still seem to glow a deep and piercing red. He looks pleased at the reverence with which Will touches the coat—but how can he not? Will thought the blazer from dinner had been stunning, but this…

Will puts the backpack down.

"It's beautiful." Will unzips it, and makes to pull it on over his thin sweatshirt at once. It fits snugly, but with enough room to move his arms and bend at the waist. The skirt swishes around his hips and brushes the backs of his thighs; the gloves may as well be an extension of his body for as well as they fit and flex with the curl of Will's fingers.

Hannibal leans back against the bike, sits sideways on the seat, watches as Will twirls in place. His smile is a small one, but the sort that Will has learned is perhaps his most genuine. It's private, not for others' consumption, but it's one he shares with Will—one he always has. "Forgive me, mylimasis. I couldn't deny myself the opportunity to see you in white."

There are so many complicated emotions tied into that sentence that Will cannot even begin to unpack them all. He can only stride forward and stand between Hannibal's splayed legs, cradle Hannibal's face in his hands, watch as his nostrils flare at the scent of leather, his lashes dip at the feel of it—an explosion of sensory output as he finds himself between Will's palms, in his grasp. But he rests himself fully into it. Trusts.

And Will knows, and Will trusts, because he knows Hannibal as well as he knows himself. Knows, as he feels steel cables stretch and tether in place, as massive pillars rise high above and sink into the sea far below them, and interlocking beams form a foundation to weather generations, there is no place either of them would rather be.

Fuck the chasm that tried to split the earth between them. Fuck having anything less than everything they've ever wanted. "We can have a real wedding," Will says softly.

He intends to continue, but Hannibal rests one of his hands over Will's where it's pressed against his cheek. "I was under the impression we already did."

He looks so contented that Will does, in his heart, believe him. But, still. "It wasn't exactly traditional."

Hannibal huffs through his nose. His eyes glimmer beneath the stars. "Neither are we."

Dear God, Will loves this man.

So much that he cannot help but to lean down, to kiss him and feel Hannibal's breath against his mouth, the pressure of their lips fitting together as perfectly as they ever have. The warmth of him. The stinging tug of his teeth against Will's flesh. The pulsing reminder of those same teeth scarred upon his throat, hidden beneath a bandage. Will kisses him until he can no longer breathe, until

Wilhelmina feels ready to crawl up his throat and into Hannibal's mouth, into him, possess him in all ways possible. Make a home inside his ribs, as she lives inside Will's.

He thinks Hannibal would probably like that. Hell, so would she.

"Thank you," Will murmurs, and his breath stutters when Hannibal's hands find his waist, tug him in, nuzzles at his face so openly and affectionately that he wonders how he could ever have seen anything but the animal who lives inside this man, the monster who so desperately loves him. "For this. For being here. For everything."

Hannibal hums, deeply fond, and deeply amused. "Don't thank me. My compassion for you is inconvenient, Will. You are without a doubt the worst decision I've ever had no part in making."

Will barks out a laugh. *"Asshole,"* he says. "Who said *I do?* It wasn't just me."

"Mm, yes. That."

"Yes, *that."* Will grins with such force it hurts his cheeks, crinkles his nose, and the way Hannibal is looking at him right now—

—he can't imagine anything better than having this for the rest of his life.

"Now give me that helmet so you don't end up widowed."

Hannibal *tsks,* and a wry expression crosses his face. A flicker of true, unhappy darkness in his eyes. "Don't joke about such things."

Still, he hands it over. A mirrored visor, like his. Round and shiny, white as the moon. Will takes himself from Hannibal so he can feel the weight of it between his palms. "Imagine the pair we'll make."

"We already do." Hannibal nods toward Will's bag, left so carelessly on the ground. "Grab your things. You wouldn't want to forget your shoes."

"Definitely not the shoes." Will hands him back the helmet and goes to retrieve the backpack, swings it over his shoulders, and tightens the straps. Clips the harness buckles across his chest and around his waist.

Hannibal eyes it. Eyes him. Smiles. "You look ready for a daring escape."

"I am." Will lingers just out of his reach. He silently revels in the flicker of irritation he reads on Hannibal's face that Will's no longer close enough to touch. For such a complex being, he's surprisingly simple. Predictable to a fault. Slowly, Will smiles back. "Are you?"

Hannibal considers this, and looks down to Will's helmet in his hands. Then to his own, resting on the handlebars. "Maybe more than I have ever been."

Will replies honestly, "Me too."

And when Hannibal slides forward, Will returns to him at last. He takes the helmet and slips it on over his unbound hair. It's heavy, but not suffocating. He expects when the air gets moving around them he'll be glad for the wind protection.

Then, like he's wearing no barricade at all, Hannibal reaches for him—and in a slow gesture of blatant sentimentality, tips Will's face exactly as he'd like it, and touches his lips to the crown of Will's helmet.

Will's heart throbs as Hannibal lets him go in favor of pulling on his own helmet. He swings his leg over the seat of the motorcycle, boots on the ground. He radiates power like this, straddling this mount of black and chromed steel. He sits astride the motorcycle like it's a warhorse, like he's as much a conqueror as his namesake. Like someone strong and dangerous: someone Will wants all the more for the depth of how he knows him. How he loves him.

He swallows hard and balances himself with his hands on Hannibal's shoulders, maybe a little too tight as he, too, swings his leg over the tiered bench seat. He promptly slides down the incline until he's meshed to Hannibal's back. Will slips his arms around his waist, tucks his legs up, and thinks of what they look like—black and white, yin and yang, a monster and his mate. Two creatures wearing a second skin, holding on for all they're worth.

Hannibal's voice is muffled but unmistakable when he asks, "Where shall we go?"

Will squeezes him around the waist once, twice, three times. He doesn't answer, but he doesn't have to. The destination doesn't matter and never has.

Hannibal chuckles, low and warm, and then his voice is lost to the roar of the engine as the motorcycle screams to life. He takes a moment to keep them steady, to adjust the mirrors and make sure they're secure and comfortable—then reaches down and rests his left hand over Will's. He squeezes back.

Will can't see their rings, but he can feel the imprint of Hannibal's teeth fresh and raw in his neck, throbbing in time with the beat of his heart. It feels the way it always has. It feels *right.*

Wilhelmina's purr echoes the motorcycle's, and syncs up to the vibration of Hannibal's back against Will's chest. They breathe in unison.

And they lurch forward. The engine snarls, surges, and accelerates. Will's arms tighten around Hannibal as they leave the cobblestones, heaving like waves on the ocean, and cut onto the smooth pavement of the city streets. They weave between cars with such speed that the lights make streaks in the sky, and Will hides his face. Doesn't breathe for a while.

He trusts, though. More than anything, he trusts.

So, he takes a breath and lifts his head. Will looks ahead:

At Hannibal first.

Then, everything else.

Chapter End Notes

hannibal's ring | will's ring | the wedding biker jacket | and a lana del rey song to tie it all up

Subscribe here on AO3, or follow me on Twitter for updates of what I'm writing next, including the continuations of this verse once they happen. And yes, to all of you who asked. I didn't want to spoil before you knew how it ended—but they'll be happening. TBC.

xo ♥

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